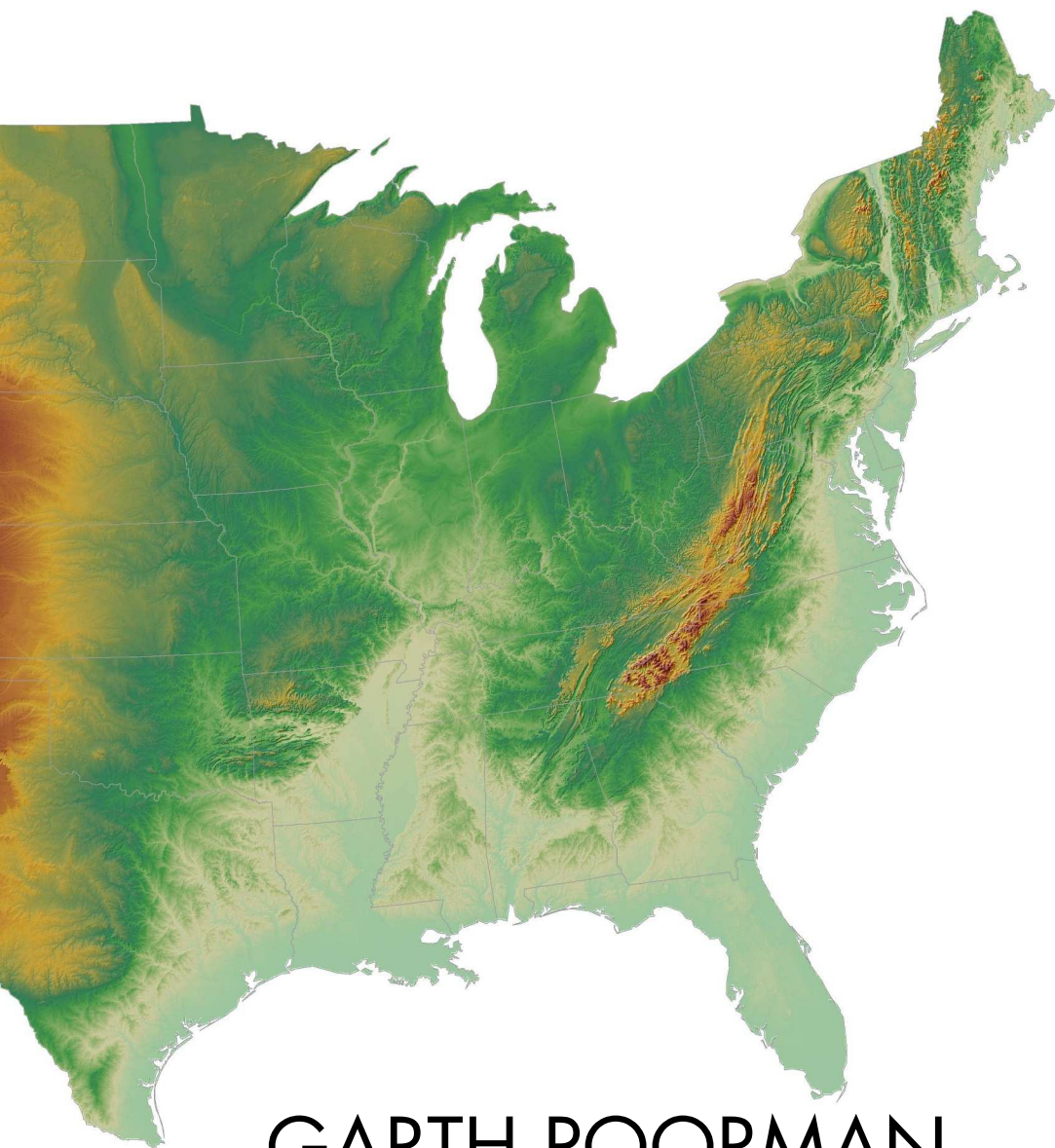


THROUGH THE REAR VIEW MIRROR

A 1998 DRIVE ACROSS THE UNITED STATES



GARTH POORMAN

Through The Rear View Mirror

A 1998 Drive Across the United States

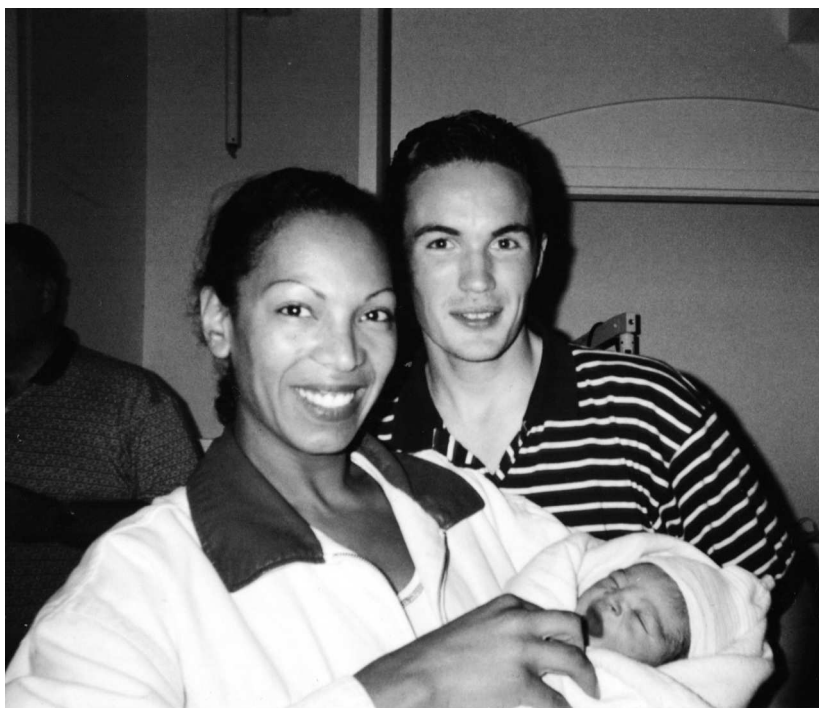
GARTH POORMAN

To Marco & Ivan

*May you chart your own paths, experience your own joys, discover
your own passions – and take as much pleasure from the mysteries
of life as I do.*

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Estee, Garth & Marco – July 3, 1998

PREFACE, 1998

Dear Marco,

It has occurred to me, in the few weeks since your birth, that your life will be quite different than mine. Many of the people and places that made up my childhood will be unfamiliar to you. Even though it will be years before you can read this, and many more until you might find yourself interested, I want to pass on a few of the stories of my life, so that you can connect to parts of the family story that proceeded you.

In his autobiography, the playwright Arthur Miller recounts a moment near the end of his marriage to Marilyn Monroe. Looking at her as she slept, he grieved the emptiness of their lives. She was addicted to drugs, and the pressure of their celebrity life had sapped the joy from her soul. He suddenly realized he wished she still had the Christian faith of her youth, and that he had not abandoned his own Jewish roots:

“I found myself straining to imagine miracles. What if she were to wake and I were able to say, ‘God loves you, darling,’ and she were able to believe it! How I wished I still had my religion and she hers ... I had no saving mystery to offer her; nor could her hand be taken if she would not hold it out. I had lost my faith in a lasting cure coming from me, and I wondered if indeed it could come from any human agency at all.”

My father and mother prize their Christian faith and passed along to Aaron and me an appreciation of the “saving mystery” at its center: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. That’s the story I grew up with. There are many other religious faiths, many other stories. It’s not a question of who is right and who is wrong.

Millions of lives have been sacrificed arguing that question. It's possible, instead, to ask what could unite people with different stories – the longing for the *spirit* of truth, and the quest to occasionally transcend our personal desires, so we can extend a helping hand to someone else.

It wasn't long ago that I was a teenager. I remember being concerned with how I looked, who my friends were, and what possessions I had – all the things that are visible to others. But, in the years that have followed, there has come a new appreciation for the unseen.

The unseen attributes, I now believe, are more of what makes a person admirable than luxury cars, fancy clothes or a well-paying job. A lot can be learned by watching how someone treats a person they don't know, especially if that person is on the margins of society. One of Jesus' teachings was, "whatever you did for one of the *least of these* brothers and sisters, you did to me." I've always liked that teaching, even as I fail to live up to its challenge.

I'm almost 25 years old, and I still get caught up in my own problems. I take comfort knowing that each day offers me a new opportunity to be generous, to focus more on the *unseen*. Arthur Miller found out too late for his wife that what the world can see and envy – money, fame, physical beauty – does not automatically bring happiness. He longed for the stories that they used to believe. Thankfully, we have many people among our clan of friends and family who have cultivated their *unseen* inner gardens – whose patience, kindness, humor and generosity have made an indelible mark on my life. Those are the stories I'm seeking out on this trip across the country and back. I offer them to you. I hope someday you will read them, and that they will make you think, or, at the very least, make you smile.



Garth, Marco & Ivan atop New York City – June 2017

PREFACE, 2018

Dear Marco & Ivan,

I'm now a – *gulp* – middle-aged man. I can see from my 1998 preface that I was a pretty serious 24-year-old. I can remember how sincerely I yearned for answers to the big questions: *How did the universe come to be? What's the purpose of human life? What happens after we die?* I had no doubt that such answers existed, and that humans could know them.

I have a slightly different viewpoint now. I'm still curious about those questions, but I'm content to *live the questions* – asking, wondering, arriving at new questions – in a way that doesn't arrive at a final answer. Living the questions has injected more awe, adventure and whimsy into my life than living the answers ever did. My favorite poet, Wisława Szymborska, calls it “the generative power of not knowing”. That is a beautiful phrase.

When I decided to make my 1998 journal into a book, I read it all the way through for the first time in 20 years. I did some light editing, but nothing that changes the substance of what I wrote and felt as a 24-year-old. A few things I wrote caused me to roll my eyes, mainly because of how much my outlook has changed in the past 20 years. Such is life. I decided to embrace that evolution and leave it all in. Maybe the differences you notice between me as a 24-year-old, who neither of you *knew*, and me now, who you know well, will amuse you, and give some insight into how life changes us all. If so, I consider that a victory.

I decided that after each chapter from 1998 I'd write an update, like I've done with this preface. They will be letters from me to you. Why? Because letters are the only form of writing I enjoy *while* I'm doing it. With other forms, writing feels more like a chore, at least until I'm done, then I feel some pleasure in a sense of

achievement. But writing letters to you two – who I know and love and can be casual and silly with – that's when I can relax and have fun.

I hope the updates will do two things. First, add a little humor and perspective to what are the writings of a slightly serious 24-year-old. If any unconscious piety mistakenly sneaks into my updates, please forgive and ignore. I don't want to preach. But we do descend from a family of preachers, and sometimes ingrained habits die hard.

Second, I want to update you about the people I write about in each chapter. A lot happens over 20 years. That much is obvious. Between 1998 and today, you both went from barely being born and not even existing to being fully grown men, with your own friends and your own life stories, much like the ones I'm telling here.

Above all, keep this in mind – I have no desire to tell you *how* to live. Life moves ever forward, and each person continues the human story in their own way. You'll ask the questions that will lead you down your own path. These updates are merely my reflections from the vantage point of middle age, from where I'm starting to get a clearer view of the curved horizon of life. Make of them what you will. Into the Time Machine, and out to the open road we go.



Christine (Nonnie) & Sturgis (Grandpop) Poorman – Tennessee, 1945

SAN BERNARDINO, 1998

*Imagine there's no countries,
it's easy if you can.
No one to kill or die for,
a brotherhood of man.*
– John Lennon, “Imagine”

*The minstrel boy to the war has gone,
in the ranks of death you'll find him.*
– Paul Robeson, “The Minstrel Boy”

The city of San Bernardino is only 61 miles from Los Angeles, an unlikely first stop on a cross-country journey. It stands guard on the western edge of America's largest county, which also bears its name. To the east are twenty thousand square miles of mostly desert, clear across to the Nevada and Arizona borders. I'm here to see Brett Illig, the brother of a friend from high school, who plays baseball for the Dodgers Single-A affiliate, the San Bernardino Stampede. The game isn't until the evening, however, so I have some time to kill.

I decide on a matinee showing of “Saving Private Ryan”. I'm not typically a big fan of war movies. I've watched “Platoon” and “Full Metal Jacket”, but don't remember much. I've never seen supposed classics like “Apocalypse Now”. This will be the first fictional World War II movie I've ever seen, which is a bit surprising since both of my grandfathers served in the war. I don't remember them talking about it.

I've been thinking a lot about war. Two days ago, my dad showed me letters his father sent his mother while serving as an

Army doctor in Europe in 1945. The letters were devoid of facts. There was no indication of where he was or what the army was doing. That was forbidden. Instead, the letters are full of longing. Longing to see his wife again. Longing to see his recently born son – my dad – who he hadn't even seen yet.

Surprise, surprise – the movie is super violent. I turn my head a few times during the storming of the beaches at Normandy, but overall I'm not too repelled by all the fictional carnage. I want to see a realistic depiction of war, and there is no way of getting around the fact that over a thousand American soldiers died on June 6, 1944, trying to get a foothold in German-occupied France. What angers me is the larger pointlessness of it all. Those soldiers had no reason to want to kill each other. They were fighting someone else's war. Wars are power plays between a very few influential people. In the propaganda that ensues, millions of innocent citizens and soldiers are convinced to sacrifice themselves in the guise of patriotism.

World War II was largely Hitler's fault. But he wasn't the first provocateur, nor the last. War seems to be an indelible stain on human societies. Like John Lennon, I dream it could be different. Sadly, Paul Robeson's world, where innocent pawns are sent off to their death, is the one in which we live.

• • •

Oh, put me in coach, I'm ready to play today

Put me in coach, I'm ready to play today

Look at me, I can be centerfield.

– John Fogherty, "Centerfield"

Brett Illig is one of six Phoenixville High School alumni bouncing around minor league baseball. I met his older brother Sean on my first day at Phoenixville Middle School. We were both new students who were asked to come in before school started to be tested for gifted classes. Sean and I were both trying to assimilate to a new town and a new school, and we started a friendship that lasted four years, until graduation. I haven't seen Sean since then, but I found out his younger brother was playing

single-A ball for the Dodgers. I know Brett well enough from his younger days when he'd play football with us out on the Illig's yard, so I figure I won't have much difficulty picking him out on the field.

The man I see walking out of the dugout bears only faint resemblance to the Brett I remember. He looks more like Sean than I expected. Brett looks at me. It takes a few seconds for recognition to kick in. "Oh my God, what are you doing here?" he asks. It's a half-hour before the game and I am one of only 30 people in the stadium. I tell him about my trip and that I live in LA. Brett's nursing an injury and won't be playing tonight. The injury is frustrating. A broken thumb kept him out for a month and in his eight games back he'd been hitting pretty well. I decide to stick around for the game anyway and we make plans to meet up afterward.

Afterwards turns out to be later than I expect. The game stumbles into extra innings – free baseball as Aaron likes to say – thanks to a routine fly ball that's dropped by the Visalia A's right fielder. With an eye on my watch, I watch as both teams swung mercilessly at curveballs in the dirt. It stays tied 3-3 through 11 innings. Finally, the same right fielder misjudges another fly ball in the bottom of the 12th and the Stampede score the game-winning run. Free at last, free at last. Thank God almighty, I am free at last.

"Man, that was brutal," Brett says as he walks out of the locker room. I laugh.

"What's the deal with the Game Notes?" I ask, holding up my program.

I've had plenty of time during the game to read the team's version of public relations. The first statistic offered is: "The Stampede have lost 17 of their last 18 series." Other highlights are: "The Stampede is last in the league in runs, hits, home runs and caught stealing." Brett's bio isn't any better.

"Yeah, they love to trash us," Brett says. "None of these reporters know what's happening either."

What gives Brett hope are personal connections he has within the Dodgers organization and that he has the physique pro scouts are looking for in a shortstop. Plus, he's still young – only 20 years old. We go out to eat and talk about his friend Mike Piazza, who is currently an All-Star playing for the Dodgers, and make fun

of an old Phoenixville baseball coach we have in common, a man named Jack Sturgeon. He informs me Sturgeon is on the shortlist to replace the long time high school baseball coach John “Doc” Kennedy. I shake my head. I couldn’t stand Sturgeon when he coached me in both baseball and basketball. It’s nice to talk to someone who shares common friends and experiences. I drop him off at his apartment and feel happy I took the time to look him up. I hope I get to see him again soon. Maybe next time will be in Dodger Stadium, playing for the big league club. Stranger things have happened.

2018

Dear Marco & Ivan –

Terrible prediction on my part. Brett never played for the Dodgers. He played two more years of minor league baseball, then hung up his glove for good. I never saw him again. I haven't seen his brother, either. There was recently a 25-year reunion for my high school class in Phoenixville. I didn't go, even though I live nearby. With one exception, I've lost touch with everyone I was friends with in high school. I've stayed in touch with college friends instead.

Back to Brett. He was inducted into the Phoenixville HS Hall of Fame last year. I know that only because I Googled him and found his blog. He's married, lives in Switzerland, and has two boys. A few months ago, he wrote about turning 40:

Maybe it is about being content within the “gray” areas of our lives, a place where we seem to be better suited to hold two opposing things together without discounting either. This has certainly been the case for me as I reflect upon the immense beauty and suffering in my own life. Both of which are constantly present, but when held together bring me to a higher purpose and meaning, and bring me out of myself.

Well said, Brett.

The other baseball player I mentioned – Mike Piazza – was elected to the *actual* Baseball Hall of Fame in 2016. No Hall of Fame inductions for me so far. If the Phoenixville Presbyterian Church had a Softball Hall of Fame, I'd have a plaque there. Absent that, I'll keep hoping that a wealthy patron bankrolls a Walking Hall of Fame. On my plaque it will note a few of my accomplishments: walking to New Orleans; 54,000 steps in a single day; inventing the shoe cactus planter. Until then, I am content to live out my life in blissful obscurity.



ROAD TO DALLAS, 1998

*I wish I was traveling on a freeway,
beneath this graveyard western sky
I'm gonna set fire to this city,
and out into the desert we're gonna ride.*
– Counting Crows, “Time and Time Again”

Interstate 10 leaves San Bernardino and heads toward Palm Springs. Past Palm Springs civilization becomes a thing of the past. For the next four hours I stare at what looks like a painting: open road ahead, the desert and a continuous chain of mountains on either side. My mind wanders. Half way to Phoenix I start wondering what I'll do if I win the \$250 million Powerball drawing this evening. Aaron told me about it. California doesn't participate but, since I'm driving through Arizona, I'll be able to buy a ticket. The jackpot is fueling a nation-wide hysteria. I promised to buy two tickets and, if I win, Aaron and I will share the winnings. So here I am, speeding down the highway, telling myself that if I win – if that 1 in 86 million lightening bolt strikes – I'll give most of it away to worthy causes and live off the yearly interest from the rest. Money is a powerful force in the American psyche. The fantasy of me winning is clear proof it has some power over me as well – more than I'd like to admit. Every person who buys a lottery ticket assumes that more money will bring them greater happiness. What if that's an illusion?

True to my promise, I stop outside Phoenix and buy the tickets. Count me in on this collective delusion. It's fun to dream. Tucson, AZ is as far as I want to drive. I've endured 500 miles of desert road and I'm tired of listening to myself think. I go to another minor league baseball game and see the Tucson

Sidewinders. Despite a beautiful night, I'm too tired to enjoy it. I go back to the hotel and watch the end of an Angels-Yankees game. I fall asleep with the words of a Billie Holiday song in my mind, no doubt inspired by the day's lottery fever:

*Money, you got lots of friends,
crowding round the door.
When you're gone and spending ends,
they don't come round no more.*
– Billie Holiday, “God Bless the Child”

• • •

*Oh, it looks like rain, Oh, I feel it coming' in ...
The mountains win again.*
– Blues Traveler, “The Mountains Win Again”

I drive out of Tucson, through New Mexico and into Texas, where the “graveyard western sky” brings the first threat of rain. I see the storm coming, far off in the distance. The dark clouds shroud the mountains on the eastern horizon. Every ten seconds a streak of yellow flashes through the clouds off on the horizon. Looks like I'm right in the storm's path.

I pull off the highway where a sign reads “Sierra Blanca” and park in a gas station, right as the storm reaches me. This looks like a one-gas-station kind of town. I might as well be on the surface of Mars. I recline my seat and let the sound of rain on my roof escort me into a nap.

Thirty minutes later, I wake and look out on a white sky. Seems like they got pretty literal when they named this place Sierra Blanca. I get back on the Interstate, refreshed. Gradually the terrain changes and oil derricks replace mountains on the horizon. Every so often I pass a refinery, its gaudy smokestacks belching exhaust. The further east I drive, the more signs of civilization I see, but the towns – and that's a generous word for what I'm seeing – still don't look big enough to support even a single K-12 school. Finally, I drive past a town that announces itself the way Texas towns all aspire to. “Stanton, Texas” the sign reads, and above the name is a laurel which announces “1997 Class A State Football Champions.”

Odessa is my destination. As I arrive, it looks like one giant oil refinery. Its slogan is “A City of Contrasts”. I’m not convinced, despite the violin superimposed over the city’s skyline on the promotional brochure. Everything around me screams oil. I look out my motel window and a refinery looks back at me. There are 10 different gas stations a stone’s throw away to fill up my thirsty Saturn – unleaded gasoline \$0.95 a gallon. It makes me think about the role oil has played in the history of this country. From the monopolistic power of Rockefeller’s Standard Oil, to the Energy Crisis of the 1970s, to the 1991 Gulf War, there has been a steep bill to pay for our dependence on oil. There are cleaner energy alternatives on the horizon, but who knows how long it will be until oil goes the way of coal and wood as primary energy sources. I won’t hold my breath. But don’t be surprised if the next time I drive into Odessa it is in an electric car.

Before drifting off to sleep, a joke on The Daily Show reminds me the Powerball drawing was last night. I totally forgot about it. Turns out I am one of the people he is referring to – a loser. Not one number on either of my tickets matched any of the six Powerball numbers. I decide to hold onto my tickets for scrapbook purposes, and as a reminder of how easy it is to be hypnotized by money. A poem I read in college comes to mind:

Puerto Rican Obituary

by Pedro Pietri

Juan
 Miguel
 Olga
 Manuel
 All died yesterday today
 And will die again tomorrow
 Passing their bill collectors
 On to the next of kin
 All died
 Waiting for the garden of Eden
 To open up again
 Under a new management
 All died

Dreaming about America
Waking them up in the middle of the night
Screaming: Mira Mira
Your name is on the winning lottery ticket
For one hundred thousand dollars

Tomorrow I have five hours of driving to get to Plano, TX,
just north of Dallas, and into the welcoming arms of the Lewis
family.

2018

Dear Marco & Ivan –

San Bernardino, CA to Plano, TX, is 1,400 miles. That's a lot of highway to cover in three days, and a whole lot of time to think. Well, I wasn't thinking the entire time. There was also plenty of singing, loud and off key, while I listened to my favorite songs ... *on a tape deck!*

I love a long drive. That hasn't changed in 20 years. You might remember I took another cross-country drive three years ago, in my dad's blue Prius. I didn't drive through Odessa, TX. If I had, my prediction that I'd be there the next time with an electric car would have been partially correct.

It's hard to put my finger on exactly what I love about long car trips by myself. When I'm driving, just like when I walk, the morning hours are more enjoyable than the afternoon. That's when the eyes (or the feet) start to tire. I guess a long drive is a metaphor for freedom – the open road, not having to answer to anyone. Aaron had a drivers education teacher in high school who liked to say that a license allowed a teenager to “say he's going over **HERE**, but really go over **THERE**.” That always made me laugh, because it's so true. When I'm out in a car, somewhere on a stretch of highway, swallowed up by the expanse of a huge country, no one knows where I am. It's just me and the music I'm listening to, in a kind of holy communion.

“The Mountains Win Again” is a song Aaron introduced me to on our first drive across country. It was March of 1996. He was moving from Philadelphia to Los Angeles, with everything he owned in the back of his green Ford Ranger. I was accompanying him on the drive west, with plans to fly back to Philadelphia from LA. That song was part of the soundtrack of our trip, and we listened to it many times in the years that followed on drives we took together from LA to Vegas. I never hear it without thinking of him. It's one of my favorite road trip songs, along with the Counting Crows album “August and Everything After”.

The more I think about it, the more I realize how key music is to my enjoyment of a long drive. I recently drove down to

Washington, DC to see my friend Endel. It's a drive I take often. One of the first questions I ask myself is – what do I feel like listening to? I love podcasts, but those are more a part of my walking life. Driving is all about the music. On this recent trip, I chose to listen to the Broadway musical “Les Miserables”. I know, I'm a total nerd. But let me tell you, those first 90 minutes of that drive, singing along to that soundtrack at the top of my lungs, were pure pleasure.

I've had hundreds of those moments in my life. I'm sure you've had some too. You don't have to be on a long drive to experience those moments when a song, a mood, and a landscape align in a mysterious way to bring about ... what can we even call it ... bliss? Yes, bliss.

I wish you both many such moments of bliss, wherever the open road takes you. Cherish them when they happen and don't take them for granted. And if you ever happen to drive across the West someday, and are taking a moment of driving-induced reflection to gaze at the mountains that line your path, play “The Mountains Win Again” and spend five minutes living vicariously through your uncle's old stories. The song speaks truth. Mountains always win – they'll be here long after any of us are.



*Back: Aaron, Grandpa Sturge, Grandma Joanne, Ben Lewis, Garth
Front: Daniel, Betsy, Janet & Mark Lewis, Doug Sullivan – Zimbabwe, 1986*

DALLAS, 1998

*I make my life a prayer to you,
I want to do as you ask me to,
No empty praise and no white lies,
No token prayers, no compromise.*

- Keith Green, "Make My Life a Prayer to You"

Mark Lewis is a man of prayer. Tonight, hand in hand around the table with his wife Janet and their daughter Betsy, he's praying for me.

"Lord, I want to thank you for Garth's presence here. I ask that you give him safety as he continues his trip. Give him a great time with the people he's going to see. Let it be a wonderful experience in his life."

I'm struck by his sincerity. He is talking to a God he knows and trusts. I've known Mark for quite a few years, but I haven't seen him since we left Zimbabwe. He moved his family to Harare shortly after we arrived in 1984. They were our closest American friends during our three years there. I was 10 when we arrived and Aaron 12. We both yearned for the sights and sounds of America, and the Lewises had a VCR – our holy grail. We had a tradition on our birthdays. Dad would drive us over to the Lewis' house, they would loan us their VCR, and we'd pick out a few VHS tapes from the ones their family had sent from the States. The Cosby Show and the A-Team were our favorites, plus football and basketball games. Getting to watch American shows that weren't on Zimbabwe's single TV channel was such an exciting feeling that I still get chills when I think back on it. Aaron and I cherished everything American during our years in Zimbabwe. When we'd

receive a package slip from the States we'd run to the post office in anticipation of what it might be – maybe a Sports Illustrated, maybe sneakers, maybe something as common as an American candy bar or tuna fish (which we couldn't get there). It was all thrilling. It didn't matter that some things arrived, ah, altered. Nonnie would cut out all pictures of women in bathing suits from Sports Illustrated's annual swimsuit issue.

Back to Mark and Janet. They stayed in Zimbabwe longer than we did. Their three children spent their entire childhoods in Southern Africa. They didn't have a compelling drive to return to the United States and pick up their previous lives, like Aaron and I did. After five years the Lewis family moved to South Africa, because a new work visa was denied by the Zimbabwean government. It's the same thing that happened to our family. Grandpa Sturge wanted to stay in Zimbabwe longer, but the government wouldn't approve it. We decided to move back to Philadelphia. Mark and Janet decided to stay in Southern Africa, and continued to work for the Navigators. They lived in Durban, South Africa until 1996, then they moved back to Dallas. Their oldest son Ben was about to finish high school and they thought it was the right decision for his education. Ironically, Ben didn't end up going to college last year. Janet says all three of their children had a hard time assimilating to the United States after growing up half a world away. Mark and Janet admit that, given the choice, their kids would happily pack up and move back to Durban tomorrow. That isn't what Mark and Janet feel called by God to do.

Their calling right now is the Navigators' college ministry in Texas. They work mostly at Southern Methodist University, trying to create college leaders who can have an impact for Christ in the lives of their fellow students. On this Friday night, they'd just returned from a nine-week training program for college leaders. Fatigue is visible on their faces. Without much staffing, Mark and Janet have put the program on their shoulders. Over the previous nine weeks, 40 students "came closer to the Lord". That's how Mark phrases it. The only setback was a \$1,500 program deficit. Mark isn't worried. "It's a faith opportunity," he says. And that is that.

One story from the training strikes me as a particular example of the power of faith. Mark divided the students into teams

of four. At the end of the program, he allowed each group to take a weekend trip as a bonding experience. Some went to Six Flags, others to baseball games. But one group threw a dart at a map of Texas. It landed on Colton, TX, population 500. Taking nothing but what they were wearing, they drove to Colton to preach God's word, relying on faith to provide them with food and shelter. They started evangelizing on the street and met a man who invited them to his house for the night. By the second night, they had talked to more than 30 people, inviting them all to the town's only church the following morning. Fourteen showed up. The congregation held an impromptu vote and gave the college students \$100 to help cover the cost of the trip. The students had other plans. They used the money to throw a Sunday afternoon BBQ in the front yard of their host's house, inviting everyone from the church. They socialized and sang and carried on as if they'd been part of the community for years. Seeing them in that yard, a passerby could never have guessed that these four men had shown up only two days earlier, with only the clothes on their backs and faith in their hearts.

Mark's face shines telling that story. He doesn't say it, but young people following Jesus' example is what makes his work meaningful, even if, after nine weeks, his energy is drained and the program is over \$1,000 in debt.

• • •

What's Dallas like in August? Hot. Mark and Janet live in a housing development – street after street of identical homes, arranged in an orderly pattern. Twenty-six straight days with temperatures over 100 degrees has made their development look like a ghost town. Nobody is outside. I walk to the community pool, expecting it to be swamped with families escaping the heat. I find myself a party of one. Air conditioning is a bigger lure than water in heat this intense. I don't stay long. I, too, retreat back to cold air. On my walk back to the Lewis' house, a deep memory is triggered by heat careening off the asphalt. I'm transported back to summer visits to Tennessee as a child. When I walk into the Lewis'

garage, the sense memory becomes overwhelming. The musty humidity of the hot air, trapped in the garage, has the exact smell and feel of the Redden's garage in Old Hickory. I continue into the air-conditioning of the house and the experience comes full circle. In a small region of my mind, it might as well be 1978. I smile as I speed back through time, reliving pleasant memories that had been dormant for years. What a magical gift memory is. Elie Wiesel wrote it this way, and in doing summarized what this whole trip is about:

"What does it mean to remember? It is to live in more than one world, to prevent the past from fading and to call upon the future to illuminate it. It is to revive fragments of existence, to rescue lost beings, to cast harsh light on faces and events, to drive back the sands that cover the surface of things, to combat oblivion and to reject death."



*What a friend we have in Jesus,
all our grief and sin to bear,
what a privilege to carry,
everything to God in prayer.*
- Popular Hymn

Two men at Bent Tree Bible Fellowship in Dallas are performing a modern version of "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" to hundreds of worshipers. Waiting in the wings, I see Pastor Pete, about to preach his final sermon in a series on prayer. The worship bulletin says the title of his sermon is "Home Economics: Praying for your church". As he begins to preach, I can tell it is a lesson close to his heart. He talks about how Jesus prayed for his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion. He reminds us how important it is to lift up pastors in prayer, citing a survey of ministers that demonstrates how stressful a job it can be. I doubt my Dad was polled. But now I'm trying to think about the last time I prayed for my Dad in his role as pastor. I can only remember a few times. When was the last time I spent more than 10 minutes praying about anything? I can't think of a single instance since my year teaching at

Cornerstone Christian Academy. When did I lose my faith in the power of prayer?

Mark Lewis hasn't lost his. In his work with college students, he stresses the concept of prayer as communication. Without communication it is impossible for a human relationship to prosper. Why should it be any different with God? Mark puts an emphasis on having quiet time each day to talk and listen to God, without interruption. In his view, prayer is more than adoration and thanksgiving. It should be, at times, hard work. He talks about prayer as someone who has seen its dividends.

He tells me a story about the tense days leading up to the 1994 elections in South Africa, the first free elections after decades of white apartheid rule. He and Janet were still living in South Africa at the time. Coincidentally, my dad was there too, working as a peace monitor for the National Council of Churches. But back to the story Mark is telling. One of the major parties – the Zulu-led Inkatha Party – was resisting calls to participate in the election. Eleventh-hour negotiations had broken down between Nelson Mandela and Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the Inkatha party's leader. A prominent American diplomat was flying to Durban to meet with Buthelezi and act as mediator, aware that if millions of Zulus didn't participate in the election it would be catastrophic, and possibly lead to violence. The diplomat arrived too late. Mark says that Buthelezi had already boarded his plane and was in the sky when the diplomat arrived. Then an odd thing happened. His plane started experiencing mechanical difficulties, forcing it to return to the airport.* The American mediator got to meet with Buthelezi after all. From that meeting sprung an agreement that Mandela approved soon after, paving the way for the Inkatha Party, and the millions of Zulus who supported it, to participate in the election. The election was so close at hand by the time this agreement was reached that the ballots had already been printed. So in the few days remaining, a sticker with the Inkatha Party symbol and box to check had to be manually affixed to each and every ballot.

Mark remembers praying for that agreement when success seemed elusive. He remembers how Christians from around the

** I researched this story in newspapers from those weeks and found no evidence in any of the coverage that the airplane story is true.*

world prayed for South Africa in those final days, asking God for a peaceful resolution to a potentially explosive conflict. Peace prevailed. For Mark, it is another example of prayer paying dividends.

Mark and Janet had very different upbringings. Janet was one of six children born to missionary parents in Singapore. Her parents and two siblings still minister in Asia. Mark was brought up in a smaller, more conventional family, in Dallas. His father was a journalist who moved up to become the managing editor of the Dallas Times-Herald. Mark tells me a story from his dad's earlier years, when he was still a city desk editor, in 1963. President Kennedy had just been assassinated in Dallas and Mark's dad had been working for 24 straight hours. The newspaper office was bedlam, but his father finally managed to get away for a few hours, hoping to come home, take a shower and sneak in a quick nap. As his father was in the shower, Mark and his brother Bret were watching television. News coverage was showing Lee Harvey Oswald, accused of shooting the President, being led out of the police station. A man stepped in front of Oswald and shot him at point blank range, leading to pandemonium. As their exhausted father walked out of the bathroom, his sons excitedly relayed what just happened. Without hesitating, their father put his suit on and headed straight back to the office for another 24 hours of work.

There is no earth shattering news coming from Dallas today. The record-setting heat is dominating the headlines. I laugh in the face of Mother Nature and go to an outdoor performance of Shakespeare's "Taming of the Shrew" at the Samuel Grand Amphitheater. The heat isn't as annoying as the mosquitos. And the mosquitoes aren't as frustrating as the play's plot. By the second act, I am hopelessly confused, so I walk back to the car. I'll tackle the nuances of Shakespeare another day.

2018

Dear Marco & Ivan –

How times have changed. I was certainly curious about prayer back then. Yet, in all the years we've spent together since, I bet you can't remember me talking about it. I guess this is a good opportunity to explain why.

In 1998, I was still a Christian. That's probably obvious from reading these chapters. The Christian story still made sense to me on a *literal* level. Humans tend to believe the stories our families pass down to us. They feel true because they are an extension of the people who loved and nurtured us. In the case of my parents, the Christian story helped them live extremely kind and generous lives. I'd witnessed that my entire life.

In 1998, though still a Christian, the undercurrents of my belief system were already changing. It was subtle at first. I had nagging doubts. I was actively questioning. By 2000, I knew that I no longer believed the core *literal* claim of Christianity: that Jesus is the unique son of God, and that through his death and resurrection we can claim everlasting life. That claim no longer felt useful as anything *other* than metaphor. Likewise, so many others: the perfect creation of the Garden of Eden, the virgin birth, all the miracles in the Gospel accounts. As for the concept of heaven, I understood it as a psychological projection of a deeply human wish – that death is not final and that we will be reunited with loved ones in a life after this one. But from that point of my life until now what has interested me is *this* life, not a hypothetical *next* one.

I was living in LA when this happened, far away from my parents. But I thought they deserved to know how my beliefs had changed. I knew it would sadden them. I also knew it wouldn't change their love for me. I went to the roof of my apartment, looked out at the beautiful view of Los Angeles, and wrote them a letter. Eleven pages later, I had said what I needed to say.

Since then, my relationship to Christianity has remained pretty constant. I don't tend to broadcast my beliefs. I have no interest in trying to change someone's mind. Maybe that's a

reaction to the evangelizing impulse of Christianity. I'm happy for people to embrace whatever story works for them. If it helps them lead a more joyful and generous life, all the better. I've chosen to create a story of my own, built from these raw materials: awe, wonder and uncertainty. The search for a literal truth to the big questions of life fell away. I've gradually become at peace with letting the mystery just ... *be*.

Quick story. One day, as I was thinking about the stories we believe, I was reminded of the creed we recited in church when I was a kid. It's called the Apostles' Creed. From a writer's point of view, I admire its brevity and its spoken rhythm. So I decided to write a creed of my own, sticking to a similar length and cadence. Reading them together is a reflection both of where I came from, and where life has taken me.

When my parents die, I will celebrate the way they lived their lives *and* the belief system that was its foundation. This might feel a little premature to say, but when I die, I hope one of you will read Garth's Creed at my memorial service as a celebration of the life I chose to live.

The Apostles Creed

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
 the Creator of heaven and earth,
 And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,
 who was conceived of the Holy Spirit,
 born of the Virgin Mary,
 suffered under Pontius Pilate,
 was crucified, died, and was buried.
 He descended into hell.
 The third day He arose again from the dead.
 He ascended into heaven
 and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,
 from whence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
 I believe in the Holy Spirit,
 the holy catholic church,
 the communion of saints,
 the forgiveness of sins,
 the resurrection of the body,
 and life everlasting.
 Amen.

Garth's Creed

I accept that everything is impermanent;
 my joys, my sorrows – my life itself.
 I choose the enjoyment of friendships
 as the Meaning I invest in life;
 nurtured by time together,
 marked by acceptance of who we are,
 believing that the practice of kindness
 is more beautiful than any ideology.
 I prefer to live in the questions,
 to exist in a spirit of wonder, not judgment.
 I believe in the value of 'I don't know',
 the beautiful fragility of memory,
 and the transcendent magic of music.
 I seek small delights –
 the peacefulness of a long walk,
 the glory of watching a hawk's flight,
 the joy of shared laughter,
 and the life Ever-Present.
 Amen.



Historic slave cabin, Laura Plantation – Louisiana, 1998

NEW ORLEANS, 1998

Louisiana has a mind all its own. It seems to go out of its way to be different. It is a place where counties are parishes, suburbs are faubergs and swamps are bayous. Even its history is distinct – first Native American land (obviously), then French territory, then a Spanish one, then a French one again. Then Napoleon Bonaparte sold it to Thomas Jefferson's US government in 1803, along with 15 million Western acres, for 15 million dollars.

I am heading to see two family members I don't know very well, so it is appropriate they have recently moved to Louisiana, which I know nothing about. For most of my life, Richard and Sandra Kuhn were names that floated past me in conversations about Tennessee. They were "Tennessee Rels" who, it turns out, haven't lived in Tennessee for most of the past 20 years. They've lived just about everywhere else – Chicago, Delaware, Colorado, India, China and, now, New Orleans. Richard and Sandra have always been a couple on the move. On this muggy Louisiana evening, I was lucky to find both of them in town.

They've only been in New Orleans six months. They've only recently figured out how to work the shower in the guest bedroom. The house feels like it's recently been unwrapped. Everything is spotless and new, ripped from a spread in "New South" magazine, if such a magazine existed. It doesn't take me long to see that Sandra is a typical Southern host, bending over backward to make me feel at home. I haven't been in the house more than five minutes before she offers me a meal of fresh trout and salad. Since I skipped dinner to make better time on the road, my stomach rumbles its approval. Richard is her amiable sidekick, joking with me one minute and giving Sandra a good-natured ribbing the next. I realize that people in the South are more practiced at making their visitors feel welcome. Maybe it's because

they take the time to talk, and to listen. Richard tells me when they lived in China the company he worked for paid for each employee to make a personal call back to the US for five minutes every week. “A lot of good that did,” Richard said. “People in the South can’t say hello in five minutes, let alone have a whole conversation.”

I’m staying for three nights. Their life stories gradually take shape in my mind, replacing the void that had been there before. They talk about their two daughters – Tracey and Mindy – who are now both mothers. Richard explains how his job at DuPont sent him from one place to the next over the course of his career, as projects changed and divisions were created and dismantled. Sandra says she can count 79 different relatives on either side of their families who have worked for DuPont. Richard and Sandra talk a lot about their years in India and China. These were projects Richard reluctantly joined after DuPont sold its explosives division and he found himself thrust into the consulting side of the business. Sandra balks at the thought of having to repeat those experiences, living in hotels and unable to communicate without the aid of a translator. Regardless, both feel like they are better people for having that international experience. If I interpret the gleam in Richard’s eye correctly, I’d guess he wouldn’t be as hesitant as Sandra to take another far-flung assignment.

Sandra’s fear of lizards becomes a running joke during my time here. As a child she had a traumatic experience when she thought a lizard was chasing her. She hasn’t been able to bear the sight of them since. Richard doesn’t miss an opportunity to tease her. He shows me Sandra’s handiwork on their screened-in porch, where she has put electrical tape over small holes in the screen so no lizards can sneak in. She used this technique when they lived in India, patching up cracks in the wall. I look around at the rest of their house and, knowing their back story, start to fully understand why she takes such pride in its appearance. Before coming to New Orleans, she had lived in a hotel room for two years. “Only one of us could walk around at a time,” she says. She no longer takes for granted the comforts of a large home. She’s lived in two different “third world” countries, so she is well aware of how privileged Americans are in comparison to most of the world. She knows they don’t truly *need* a house like the one they have. On the other hand, their time in India seems to have imparted a belief that the problems

of poverty in the world are complex and insurmountable, and that no change in their lifestyle can do much to alter that.

This is a question that challenges me, and that I wrestle with: How can I live as a Christian in the richest nation in the world without ransoming my soul? I'll leave this unanswered, since I don't feel at all qualified, especially at the age of 24, to take a stab at it. I'll say this, though. My gut feeling is that Jesus wouldn't want us to be poor for the sole reason of sympathizing with the billions of people in the world who are also mired in poverty. A Mexican woman expressed a similar opinion when I was in Cuernavaca, Mexico last month. An American girl in our group told the woman that our trip had opened her eyes to the extent of her American privilege. The Mexican woman said, "That you now understand that is joy enough. Enjoy the privileges you have. Just never forget that privilege is not shared by most of the rest of the world. And if you have the opportunity to ease the suffering of even one or two people in your life, then you have been successful."



*They told me to take a streetcar named Desire, transfer to one called
Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at Elysian Fields!*

- Blanche DeBouois, from "A Streetcar Named Desire"

A streetcar named Desire no longer operates in New Orleans. Elysian Fields still exists, hidden east of the French Quarter, a footnote of literary history. Its tenements, made legendary by Tennessee Williams, are now home to public housing units. Williams moved away from New Orleans after writing "A Streetcar Named Desire" in 1947. When he returned, in 1978, he looked at his old neighborhood and said, simply, "It looks a lot different."

That was 20 years ago. So you can imagine how much *more* different it looks today. I shudder to think what his opinion would be. New Orleans, like most cities, has been taken over by the forces of consumerism. I walk the French Quarter and am assaulted by souvenir stores and neon signs advertising "authentic Creole

cuisine”. Behind me is a nearly completed multi-million dollar Harrah’s Casino. When the state legislature approved its construction six years ago, it hoped that gambling would revitalize a sagging downtown economy. That dream remains unrealized. The casino is still not opened, bogged down in legal squabbles.

I pass by the city’s new aquarium on my way to the View Carre. If I’ve been to one aquarium, I’ve been to them all, so I pass it by and save eight bucks. Judging by the crowds, the aquarium looks like it is doing alright for itself. So many shop windows display mugs, voodoo dolls and every tchotchke imaginable that can be branded with “New Orleans Jazz”. Everything has a price. It’s as if the city is saying, “if you have enough money, you can buy yourself an authentic experience.” I beg to differ. New Orleans was once home to the fictitious Ignatius Reilly and the very non-fictitious Jerry Wever – two famously broke adventurers. I decide it will be an insult to their thrifty legacies for me to experience New Orleans on anything more than a shoestring budget. I am going to see as much of the city as I can, bankrolled by a single \$20 bill. Call it \$17. I already spent three dollars on the ferry across the river.

I start my adventures in thrift at the offices of the Jean Lafitte National Park Rangers. They have seven locations around the city, offering information and guided tours. Most crucially, all tours are free. I sign up for the French Quarter tour at 11:30am, and the Garden District tour three hours later.

We are a group of seven for the first tour. I’m the youngest by a decade. I learn that until 1900 the French Quarter was just that – *French*. English speakers weren’t welcome in this community, which covers 10 city blocks along the Mississippi River. When large numbers of English speakers started to settle in New Orleans, after the Louisiana Purchase (1803), they settled in areas outside of the French Quarter called faubergs (French for suburb). There are five Fauburg districts. One is the Garden District, where most of the rich settlers of English heritage chose to put down their New Orleans roots. The French Quarter’s architecture is distinct, more bold and colorful, than the understated Faubergs nearby. Houses in the Quarter are built right up to the sidewalk, with long wooden shutters and raised ground floors to allow air flow through street level vents, a necessity for life before air conditioning. The streets have a cramped feeling. Yet, enter one of the homes, and you will

likely find a spacious courtyard just inside the house, tucked away out of sight in typical French and Spanish style.

Our guide picks out a few houses of note: a yellow one on Pirate's Alley where William Faulkner wrote his first novel; the apartment where Tennessee Williams wrote "Streetcar"; the blacksmith's shop where Jean Lafitte allegedly ran his smuggling operations; and the studio where Robert Audubon painted many of his "Birds of North America". We finish on Bourbon Street. Meant to honor the French line of kings by the same name, its name has a different association for modern visitors. Bars and nightclubs line the sidewalk, waiting to come alive when the sun goes down. This is the street where the yearly carnival reaches the height of its revelry on Mardi Gras (Fat Tuesday). Mardi Gras is the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday, which signals the start of Lent. The carnival starts on January 6th and continues for weeks, leading up to the Mardi Gras culmination. Then, as the clock strikes midnight, the music stops. Bars and clubs kick everyone out and lock their doors. Police ride down Bourbon Street announcing, "please clear the street – Mardi Gras is over!" The crowds cheer and then disperse. The party's over. Time to repent.

It's 1pm in mid-August. Bourbon Street is in its off-season. I wonder if I'll ever come here for Carnival. I might be better off leaving it alone. I'm not a big fan of crowds. I prefer something more understated and cerebral. The French Quarter during Mardi Gras is the wrong place to look for that. I guess I'm just another Englishman who should look for his thrills elsewhere.

The Garden District is three miles away, so I part with another \$2 on a round-trip ticket via the St. Charles trolley. I spend another \$4 on lunch. I'm at \$11 and counting. If I'm being honest, the Garden District tour is a bit of a disappointment. Too much emphasis on architecture and not enough on personal history for my taste. But the Lafayette Cemetery is interesting. Many of the scenes from "Interview with a Vampire" were filmed here. The entire cemetery has above-ground vaults holding its dead. The earliest inhabitants of New Orleans learned the hard way that underground graves quickly fill up with water, causing both the body and casket to float.

I catch the 4pm ferry back to Algiers Point on the west side of the river. The ferry has two levels. I stand on the lower one, with

the cars, in the open air. I lean over the rail as we push off, just inches from the Mississippi River. This river has been picking up silt far to the North and distributing it to the Delta since time immemorial – long before even the first French explorer arrived here and claimed “all the lands whose waters empty into this great river” in the name of King Louis XIV. All that silt made this land some of the most fertile in the world. The climate, similar to the Caribbean, made it an ideal spot to harvest sugar cane. With its labor-intensive agriculture and proximity to the ocean, New Orleans became an epicenter for the Atlantic slave trade. This river has made many men wealthy, and thousands more weep.



*When Israel was in Egypt's land,
 Let my people go,
 Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
 Let my people go.
 Go Down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land,
 Tell Ole' Pharaoh, to let my people go.
 - Paul Robeson, “Go Down Moses”*

Along the Great River Road, sugarcane fields line my drive. Cotton is king in much of the deep South, but in southern Louisiana sugarcane wears the crown. My window is down and the car stereo is up. Paul Robeson is singing “Go Down, Moses” in the richest baritone voice I’ve ever heard. I wonder what it would have been like to ride along this road on a horse 200 years ago, in 1798. Would I be hearing field songs sung by slaves as they cut sugarcane on a muggy Louisiana afternoon?

I arrive at what they call the Laura Plantation. It doesn’t resemble a pre-Civil War plantation as most imagine them. Its colorful exterior proudly asserts French heritage. In early 1800s Louisiana, the color of the main house told a traveler who lived there – white for British Protestants; bright yellows and reds for French Catholics.

Thomas Jefferson supposedly gave this land to Laura’s great-grandfather, shortly after the Louisiana Purchase.

Senegambian slaves built the main house. The Senegambians, known for their construction ability, built the entire U-shaped structure raised on brick pillars, without the aid of a single nail. Laura's ancestors were French aristocrats who harbored a deep distrust of all English speakers. If a Frenchman visited, they would immediately be offered a place at the dinner table. If an Englishman rode up, they'd only be offered tea or water on the porch, and then bid on their way. According to legend, no English speaking men or women were ever allowed inside the house. That sounds like a good story, which means it probably isn't technically true.

Reading the tourist literature, it seems Laura's family had more than its share of headstrong members. Her great aunt, besieged by guilt when her daughter died on a trip to France, shut herself in a parlor room and did not leave it for the next 20 years. Death was the only force that could separate her from her grief, shut away in that room. Laura's grandmother refused to talk with her son-in-law (Laura's father) for the rest of her life after he bought back a slave girl the grandmother had sold. According to the story, Laura had asked her father to buy the slave girl back so she wouldn't be torn away from her family.

Women ran this plantation for most of the 1800s. Unlike the English, French culture had fewer problems with women performing business duties. The family's ownership ended with Laura. Her father told her, as a young girl, that the plantation would be hers one day. She told him she didn't want it. Again, as the legend has it, she had been angered by the cruelty she witnessed and wanted no part of the plantation enterprise. The Civil War had come and gone, and slavery had ended, but Laura wrote in her diary that it hardly made any difference on their plantation. Every year, in the registry of ex-slaves still working on the plantation, a \$12 salary was registered in a lined notebook. Never was any cash handed out. Next to every entry it reads, "The sum of this wage is entirely owed back to the plantation store." Such was the existence of most southern sharecroppers.

Laura received a good education and married, of all things, an English man. It seems like even the most restrictive traditions are bound to end – sometime. She sold the plantation to a French speaking German family, whose descendants lived here until 1984. Laura moved to St. Louis, where her children persuaded her to

write down the stories she would tell them about growing up on a plantation in Louisiana. Those journals are what give the guides such a wealth of information to share. I'd be a little more confident that the stories were historically accurate if they'd been written down *when* she was growing up. Memory can be a slippery, fungible thing.

There is one feature of the Laura Plantation that none of the others along the River Road still have: original slave cabins. From the back of the main house, I see five wood structures nestled against the edge of the fields. During the height of the plantation's sugarcane production there would have been about 200 slaves living in cabins like these. Only these five have survived the test of time – solitary monuments to the resilience of people who knew more misery and longing than I can ever imagine. They sang of their hopes by celebrating the liberation of another enslaved people, 3,000 years before. They could relate to the ancient Israelites, who escaped from Egypt and cast off their oppressors, and they appropriated those legends into song. They needed a Moses. Or, as it turns out, a Lincoln. And a King. But most importantly, they needed to keep singing, and they did just that, proclaiming their desire to be free.

2018

Dear Marco & Ivan –

When I read about my experiences in New Orleans in 1998, I think about what lay ahead for that city, in the unforeseeable future. Hurricane Katrina slammed into Southern Louisiana seven years later, in 2005, killing more than 1,500 people. I see that devastating tragedy in my mind's eye, but then I also think of small triumphs. Because it was 2009 when I walked into the French Quarter again, this time at the end of a 1,600 mile walk from upstate New York. The four months it took me to do that, and the hundreds of people who hosted me, were one of the greatest joys of my life. Life is complicated that way – joys and sorrows bunched up next to each other, providing the contrast of life.

I've been thinking a lot about my walk to New Orleans. When I decided to turn this 1998 journal into a book, it occurred to me that I could do the same for my walking journal. That's another project, for another year. But it is impossible for me to read about how Richard and Sandra welcomed me in New Orleans, and how Mark and Janet did the same in Dallas, without noticing a recurring theme in my life: being the recipient of immense gifts of hospitality, and the joy and gratitude that have come from those experiences.

I've been welcomed into hundreds of homes, and cared for by countless friends and strangers. I couldn't count them all if I tried. I know this for sure – the hospitality I've received is one of the things I'm most grateful for in life. It's probably why I'm so fascinated by what I like to call "the sharing economy". It has become one of the organizing principles of my life. I don't seek to collect possessions. I'd rather seek moments of shared joy, and a heightened sense of *presence*.

How to define presence? There are moments when I feel so content in my "right now" that I am flooded with a feeling of acceptance about everything that has happened in the past, and everything that might happen in the future. The present moment is enough. That overflowing of acceptance applies to everything in

life, no matter how broken or dysfunctional. As I try to explain it, I realize these are intensely subjective experiences, both beautiful and fleeting. They are not *thrilling* in a way intense pleasure can be, but they are deeply satisfying. Not surprisingly, they often arrive, unexpectedly, when I'm walking.

One of the first writers that inspired me to think deeply about presence was Eckhardt Tolle. He wrote a book called *The Power of Now*, and then another called *A New Earth*. The first book is self-explanatory. The second talks about how the default structure of the human mind focuses most of our mental energy on either the Past or the Future, thus robbing us of the only slice of time *available* to us: the Present. I read it before my walk to New Orleans and it felt like an epiphany. It helped me recognize my mind's default setting for what it is. Once I recognized it, I had a greater ability to override that tendency at times, to better enjoy the present moment in all its transient glory.

I've read that humans aren't good at remembering what we've learned, or what was said, but we are excellent at remembering how something made us *feel*. When someone is truly present with us, it makes us feel important. Like a magnet, it also helps us be a little more present in the process. There are few people more practiced at making people feel good than the musician Bruce Springsteen, who plays to huge crowds all over the world. He said it like this: "I get paid to be as present as I can be for every minute I'm out on the stage." There must be some wisdom in that.

I'm constantly reminding myself of that wisdom, with mixed results. For now, I'm going to stop typing the word present. I know you must be sick of reading it. The Dalai Lama called, and even he thinks I am overdoing it a bit. But you get my point. Being present is important, and it's the work of a lifetime.

Oh, and Sandra and Richard are both alive and well. I saw them at the Tennessee reunion last year. She has still not overcome her fear of lizards.



ROAD TO MEMPHIS, 1998

*I wish I knew how it would feel to be free
 I wish I could break all the chains holding me
 I wish I could say all the things I should say
 Say 'em loud, say 'em clear, for the whole round world to hear*
 - Nina Simone, "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free"

I drive north from New Orleans. I drive through Jackson, MI and then head west toward Vicksburg, a city built up against the banks of the Mississippi River. The drive from Jackson to Vicksburg is less than an hour – so effortless that I barely notice it. Thirty seven years ago, a group of black and white Freedom Riders tried to take that same ride. They didn't even make it out of the bus station. They were trying to continue the rides started by the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE). CORE's interracial bus rides had been interrupted by racist violence in Alabama, where they were beaten up while trying to integrate a bus station. A second wave of Freedom Riders managed to continue the trip, despite continuing threats of violence, from Alabama to Jackson, MI. That's as far as they got. Police in Jackson ordered them to leave the white section of the bus station. They refused, were arrested, and sent off to jail. They chose not to post bail, to protest the discriminatory law. Most stayed in a Mississippi jail for the better part of a month.

Driving anywhere in Mississippi, I'm reminded of the tragic struggle that took place here in the name of equal rights, especially in the 1950s and 60s. Its back roads and Main Streets were the setting for countless atrocities, committed for the cause of racial segregation. President Kennedy made a speech in June 1963 – five months before he was killed – saying, "I am asking Congress to enact legislation giving all Americans the right to be served in facilities which are open to the public – hotels, restaurants and

theaters, retail stores and similar establishments.” None of those public facilities were integrated in Mississippi, which was probably the most unrepentantly racist state in an overwhelmingly racist South (with Alabama a close second). Medgar Evers was the head of the Mississippi branch of the NAACP in 1963. He was shot and killed in front of his house, three hours after Kennedy’s speech.

The list of racist killings that took place in Mississippi is a long one. Three college students, two white and one black, were murdered and buried in an earthen mound one month after President Johnson signed the Civil Right Bill of 1964 into law. They were trying to teach black Mississippians about their rights as US citizens. Nine years before that – in 1955 – the nation’s attention had been drawn to a little town called Philadelphia, Mississippi, where a 14 year-old boy named Emmitt Till was found dead and mutilated. Three white men claimed he had “sassed” one of their wives at a local store. The words that Till supposedly said to the woman are, “Hey, baby”. The three men were found not guilty by a local jury of all white men. Those are just two examples of what Mississippi was like as recent as a generation ago – when Grandpa Sturge was a little younger than I am now.

Some thirty years has passed since the worst of the violence. Mississippi is a much quieter place. Its racism is more subtle. Maybe the state is fed up with playing such an obvious villain in American history. I’m staying the night in Vicksburg, a city with its own share of historical drama. Floating casinos now line its river banks, once the site of a turning point in the Civil War.

In the spring of 1863, Vicksburg was the last Confederate stronghold along the Mississippi River. The Union Army knew that its surrender would be a catastrophe for the South. It would cut them off from supplies and reinforcements from their Western allies. Control of the river would also allow the Union Army to move goods and men safely between Minnesota and the Gulf of Mexico. President Lincoln ordered General Grant to capture the city at all costs. A two-month siege followed. Finally, on July 3rd, 1863, the Confederate General Pemberton surrendered to Grant on a bluff near the river, ending a siege that had nearly led to the starvation of Vicksburg’s citizens. Most had already fled to caves in the nearby hills to escape the constant artillery fire from Union gun boats.

That surrender took place *exactly* 100 years before Medgar Evers was shot in front of his house in Jackson. His killer, Byron de la Beckworth, was fighting the same battle his forefathers had waged unsuccessfully in Vicksburg three generations before. He was fighting for the continuance of a racist way of life, codified in official laws that segregated blacks and whites in Mississippi, and which deprived blacks of political participation. Pemberton, Beckworth, and all the white Mississippians who were sympathetic to them – both in 1863 and 1963 – were on the wrong side of history. They lost, destroying lives in the process. But even amidst all that sadness, equality took a few painful steps forward.

The next morning I leave Vicksburg and continue north through the Mississippi Delta. I don't see many signs of economic gain brought forth by the 250-year struggle for equal rights. Life on this road is rural and poor. Black faces are more common than white. Abandoned farm machinery piles up in front yards. Outside of the small towns are miles of healthy cotton plants, stretching into the horizon. I doubt much of that money will find its way into these people's pockets. The constant evolution of labor – from slavery to sharecropping to mechanized farming – has managed to hide prosperity from the working poor every step of the way. With the onset of two World Wars in 1917 and 1941, and then the advent of the automatic cotton picker, many rural blacks decided it was time to get out. Millions moved north to cities like Memphis, Chicago and Detroit. Black migration from the rural south to the urban north was one of the largest internal movements of people in world history. It forever altered the nation as a whole.

The people I see sitting on their porches along Route 61 are some of the ones who stayed behind. They don't look like life holds much joy for them – but appearances can be deceiving. It reminds me of something Mike Rose wrote about his experience growing up in a small town:

“The people I grew up with were retired from jobs that rub away the heart or were working hard at jobs to keep their lives from caving in or were anchorless and in between jobs and spouses or were diving headlong into a barren tomorrow ... I developed a picture of human existence that rendered it short and brutish or sad and aimless or long and quiet with rewards

like afternoon naps, the evening newspaper, walks around the block, occasional letters from children in other states.”

An afternoon storm sweeps in over the Mississippi River, so I pull into an Exxon station to avoid driving in a downpour. Across the road is a casino, its shine and luster a stark contrast to the humble homes of farmers that dot the other side of the road. A sense of sadness overcomes me. The countless years of struggle – between white and black, rich and poor – seem to have made little difference. Even worse, the direction in which salvation is hoped to be found seems to be symbolized by the casino staring at me across Route 61. Sigh. Time for another roadside nap.

2018

Dear Marco & Ivan –

That depressing chapter calls for a feel-good update. I won't talk about what a racist country the United States has been for most of its existence. That's obvious enough when reading history. I'll talk about music instead. Who doesn't love music?

Let's go back to Bruce Springsteen. I watched a concert of his on PBS years ago. The camera would often pan into the crowd while he performed. I'll never forget the expressions on those many thousands of faces – total bliss. The crowd was singing along with their favorite songs, totally transported by the hypnotic joy of the music. I don't think I've ever seen people happier to be right where they were.

When I wrote this journal, I didn't plan to quote so many lyrics. It's just that so many things remind me of songs. The only problem is this: seeing lyrics typed out – rather than hearing them sung – is like *reading* about a magic trick. The experience is muted. The full experience is lyrics married to a melody and *then* you have a song, a vehicle to convey complex emotions – longing, love, anger, hope, regret.

Here's a question: How effectively does the emotional power of a song travel across generations? Can a song that is meaningful to my father have the same effect on either of you – two generations removed? Musical tastes are always evolving. I might like some of the same music as my father, but I doubt I'd love any of the same songs as my grandfather. Why is that?

My Dad and I love Paul Simon. He has the ability to write heartbreakingly honest lyrics about the human condition. When I read that last chapter I thought, "what a missed opportunity to quote a Paul Simon song!" So let me do it here. The song that would have been *perfect* for that drive is "Graceland". It starts with a man on a Mississippi road, headed toward Memphis, just like I was:

*The Mississippi Delta
Was shining like a National guitar
I am following the river, down the highway
Through the cradle of the civil war
I'm going to Graceland, Graceland – Memphis, TN*

The man in the song is traveling with his son. Each verse layers in stories that relate to the father's predicament, playing off the double meaning of Graceland – both the home where Elvis Presley once lived, and a hypothetical place where our mistakes are forgiven. Maybe I didn't think of this song in 1998 because it didn't connect to my world yet. Maybe I needed more years under my belt to appreciate its complexity.

My dad and I played a game over dinner when we were on our walk in England. We went back and forth, each picking our favorite Paul Simon songs, like a sports draft. Once a song was picked it couldn't be chosen again. Grandpa Sturge got first pick and chose "Under African Skies". My first pick was "Still Crazy After All These Years". Then he snapped up "Train in the Distance". In retrospect, that song should have been my first pick. To me, it represents the height of Paul Simon's lyrical genius. It's a simple song about a man and a woman, a relationship that starts and then falls apart, and about all that's lost in life if we are constantly looking ahead, convinced that the next "train in the distance" is going to make us happy. Here's the final verse:

*What is the point of this story?
What information pertains?
The thought that life could be better
Is woven indelibly
Into our hearts
And our brains*

Paul Simon was mimicing the wisdom of the Stoics. If you want to be happy, Epitecus wrote, learn to want what you *already* have. If you put too much focus on what you don't have, one of two things will happen: either you'll eventually get it, and find that the happiness you feel is only fleeting. Or you won't ever get it, and remain frustrated by unattained desire.

For fun, I've put all the songs I've quoted in this book into a Spotify playlist called Through the Rear View Mirror. My username is DolphusRaymond. I hope you listen to a few of them while reading the book. I can't promise you'll like them – we are separated by a generation of experiences, after all – but maybe some of the magic I felt will seep down to you, despite the years that separate us. Try it. Put on your headphones, click Train in the Distance, and let the song sweep over you, like that storm swept over me in the Mississippi Delta, way back when.



Uncle Robe & Garth – Memphis, 1975

MEMPHIS, 1998

As I pull into Uncle Robe's driveway, I am confronted by the subjectivity of memory. Some things feel exactly the same as when I was a child – the overpowering humidity, the cobblestone pavement, the huge oak trees lining the street. Other things look very different. Uncle Robe's house looks much smaller than I remember. So does the street it's on. I used to think this road was a major thoroughfare, not the meandering residential lane it turns out to be. I get out and stretch my legs. I walk into the backyard and look around. Two houses down is the pool where I swam ten non-stop laps in the summer of 1982. That was the goal my dad had set, after which I could stop going to summer swim camp – my personal hell on earth. All around me are memories of my childhood. They are happy memories of security and playfulness; of riding in Cadillacs and having impromptu cherry apple fights; of visits with Missy and Marcy; of running around in mesh shirts and tube socks.

I am met by Uncle Robe. He is taking his dog Leo out for an evening stroll. Age has taken its toll on both of them. Robe is 96. Leo is roughly the same age in dog years. Each evening they go out to the driveway and walk around in circles. Robe's wife Irene isn't sure why Leo walks in circles. She guesses it's because he's blind in one eye. Coincidentally, Robe's sight has deteriorated in tandem with Leo's. He almost needs to be in an embrace with the TV to watch his favorite show, "Walker, Texas Ranger". His legs are still spry – for a 96 year old – and walking doesn't seem to pose a problem. Meeting me in the driveway, he looks up with his sideways grin, puts his big hand out and says, "Hey there Garth, it's nice to see you." He is wearing brown slacks, belted high above his waist, and a red button-down sweater. A collared shirt peaks out from behind the expanse of red. Irene looks the same as I

remember her, only with whiter hair. She has always been a well-kept woman, true to her southern roots.

We pass the night alternating between the kitchen and living room, reminiscing about life while eating ice cream, and half-heartedly listening to TV commentary about the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Robe and Irene seem content to mostly stay home these days, where Irene does a good job of looking after both her husband and her dog. She does everything – chauffeuring, cooking, troubleshooting. Her son-in-law Bill comes over to help out with house repairs. Television, even though Robe can't see it well, is the main activity. Robe still loves to talk, and once he is on a roll it's tough to stop him. His memory seems sharp, but like many old folks he is prone to cover the same topics again and again.

He was born in 1902, one year after President McKinley was assassinated, into a world dominated by horses and railroads. He grew up in Danville, Kentucky with five siblings. His oldest sister, Beth, is my mom's grandmother. She died before I was born, but Grandma Joanne adored her. Robe and Beth's father worked in real estate for much of his life, then ran for the United States Congress in 1922. Robe's memory is that his father lost by just 100 votes, running as a Republican in a state that was dominated by Democrats. (I checked. He lost by a lot more than that.)

Robe left home in 1917 to join the Navy, right as the United States entered World War I. He says he lied about his age to get in. The Navy left an indelible mark on him. He comes alive when telling these stories. He served on both the USS Texas and the USS California. He saw nearly all of Central and South America while on those ships, as well as all the ports on the West Coast of the United States. He remembers being docked in San Diego and hearing that his crewmates were headed to Tijuana to buy cheap whiskey. Unfortunately, Navy regulations forbid liquor being brought back on the ship. The unfriendly task of policing that policy – and dumping it over the side when he found it – fell to a young commissioned officer named Robley Kincaid.

Robe's Republican roots are still evident. He tries to keep up with the big scandal in the city he used to call home. He is no fan of Bill Clinton or Al Gore, despite the fact that both of them are from the south. At one point, he looks at me and says, "You know who was a real good President? Ronald Reagan!" I bite my tongue

and smile. The Washington, DC he lived in as a young man is different from the one that exists today. Much, much different.

Robe lived in DC from 1922 to 1968, when he retired from Eastman Kodak after 38 years of service. He saw the city's bars closed down during Prohibition, then reopened a decade later. He lived in DC through the Depression – walking five miles to work each day during a trolley car strike – and continued living there into the prosperity of the post World War II years. He saw the city's demographics change from predominately white to predominately black. On two separate occasions he tells me that where he lived, in the Chevy Chase section of the city, “you couldn't find a colored person for 15 blocks in either direction.” Again, I smile and bite my tongue. I try not to judge him for his obvious prejudices. He was born into a deeply racist culture, and is a product of that society's assumptions – many of which I vehemently disagree with. But, at age 96, no sermon on the equality of all people is going to change anything, so I stay silent.

One thing remains indisputable. Regardless of his outdated views on race, Uncle Robe is one of the kindest, most gentle men I've ever met. He has a particular affection for children. Whether he is talking about Irene's grandchildren, or remembering my grandmother Nana Dot (his niece) as a toddler in DC, he does so with a glimmer in his eye. He uses phrases like “cute as a button” and “just as sweet as could be.” He has fond memories of Dot's youth. He once bought her a double-decker ice cream cone, only to watch it fall onto the ground as soon as they left the store. Dot broke into tears. It “broke his heart,” Robe says, and he turned right around and bought her another.

Nana Dot grew up as an only child after a younger sister, Betty Ann, died when just 13 months old. Nana Dot also flirted with tragedy as a small child. Robe recalls that one day Dot was playing with a match on the front steps of her house. She struck it against the ground and it caught fire. In her surprise, she dropped the match on her dress. Had it not been for a black man, who was walking along the street, she might not have survived. The man rushed to this little girl that he didn't know, took off his coat, and smothered the flames. It worked. Even though she had some burn scars for the rest of her life, she survived. Those who believe in angels can make a case that this man was one of their ranks. Divine

or mortal, I am one who is indebted to him for my very existence.

• • •

“Go get Ralph. We’re ready to leave.”

- Martin Luther King, April 4, 1968

Seconds after saying those words on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Martin Luther King was shot and killed by James Earl Ray. The bland practicality of those words seem an inappropriate epitaph for a man whose speeches inspired a movement, and who touched the lives of almost every American alive in the 1960s. He made a speech in Atlanta, days before coming to Memphis, that was a more fitting epitaph. In it, he spoke prophetically as a man who realized his days were numbered. He knew there were forces conspiring to take his life. He compared himself to Moses, who had gazed out over the Promised Land in the book of Exodus, but who didn’t live long enough to make it there with his people. Turns out Moses was an apt analogy. A few nights later, Martin Luther King was dead at the age of 39.

The Lorraine Motel is now the National Civil Rights Museum. It is a powerful experience to behold, especially Room 306, where Martin was staying the night he was shot. The room is staged exactly as it looked on April 4, 1968. The window looks out on the balcony where he was gunned down. A display describes in exacting detail the moments leading up to the shooting. Martin, Jesse Jackson, Ralph Abernathy and a few others were getting ready to go to a dinner in their honor at a local home. They were running late. King stepped outside, James Earl Ray fired, and riots engulfed cities around the country for the next week. Once again, the world had changed.

I notice the other tourists around me. The older ones are emotional about what they are seeing. The visitors are predominately black, a mixture of young and old. Most seem to be part of large groups, often wearing family reunion t-shirts. The younger ones walk through the museum with a kind of manufactured disgust, reading about the depths of injustice present

just 30 years ago as if they almost can't fathom it. They are the benefactors, at least in part, of what King and *so many others* struggled and died for – the right to more equal opportunity, full voting rights, and an end to state-sanctioned segregation. The younger folks, and I include myself in this group, are also *less* fortunate in a way. We didn't get a chance to be a part of the struggle, to experience the sense of community it created, and benefit from the strength of character it bestowed.

The museum is my only stop in downtown Memphis. I can't bring myself to be herded into Memphis' answer to the French Quarter – a place called Beale Street. I steer clear of the sightseers and the gaudy shops and head back to spend the evening with Robe and Irene. Beale Street might have been particularly busy tonight. August is a big tourist month in Memphis, as Robe reminds me at least four times during my visit. "It's the month of the King's death," he says. He isn't referring to Jesus. He then follows up with a question: "You like his music?"

"I've never been much of an Elvis Presley fan," I say, each time. "No, neither was I," he responds, on cue. Irene and I share a conspiratorial smile.

We decide to go out to eat. Robe and Irene are taking me out to sample the best food Memphis has to offer. I'm exaggerating. It's just the place closest to their house, a cafeteria-style restaurant called Luby's. The name tells me all I need to know. I make a quick prediction, to myself, that 75% of the patrons will be senior citizens.

I'm chosen as designated driver, and the three of us pile into Irene's Cutlass Supreme. Robe hasn't been allowed to drive for the past six years. Irene knew it was time to take his license away when she saw him repeatedly lurching back and forth in front of the mailbox, trying to line the car up so he could reach out and get the mail. I look in the rear view mirror and there he is in the backseat, smiling and wearing a huge USS Texas hat, perched high on his head. For some unknown reason, he only wears a hat when in the car. As soon as we get out at Luby's he takes it off.

We get in line at the cafeteria. This would be exactly like high school if everyone else wasn't old enough to be my grandparent. My estimate looks a little conservative. The senior citizen ratio is closer to 80-20. Dinner goes off without a hitch. I

don't let the facial hair on the ladies serving us drinks detract from the enjoyment of my meal. I have the fried fish with broccoli and a baked potato. Robe battles with the roast beef. We tip dollar bills when the waitress refills our drinks. All in all, we have a grand time. But, man, I'm not looking forward to getting that old.

I leave Memphis the following morning. Irene has a lunch packed for my ride to Nashville. Robe gives suggestions on the best route. Then, as we get ready to say goodbye, he comes right out with it. "Well, Garth, this is probably the last time you'll get to see me." Irene scoffs, but it's most likely true. He knows it. Irene knows it. I know it. Memphis isn't a place I visit often and, at 96, Robe isn't going to be around much longer. He walks me to the car and waves as I back out and drive away. My last sight of him is that smiling face, slightly hunched over, wrapped up in a red button-down sweater. I miss him already.

2018

Dear Marco & Ivan –

Uncle Robe died two years after my visit, in November 2000. It was true that I never saw him again. It was a perfect goodbye. We get so few of those in life. Reading this chapter, twenty years later, makes me smile at the thought of those last memories we made together. Robe was 98 years old when he died – a remarkable age. I called him Uncle Robe but he was actually my *great-great* uncle. Uncle Robe was to me what I'd be to your grandchildren! Think about that for a second. That I had the privilege to know him as an adult, as well as when I was a kid, is something I cherish.

The person to whom Robe was simply uncle, no greats attached, was my grandmother. Aaron and I called her Nana Dot. She died before Uncle Robe, from cancer, in the spring of 1997. By all indications, Uncle Robe loved his neice very much, and she him. Something I have in common with Uncle Robe is that I'm an uncle, but not a father. Robe was married twice – once to a woman much older, and then to Irene, the woman he was married to by the time I was born. He didn't have kids of his own, but he had other kids to lavish his attention on – first Nana Dot, and then, much later, both Irene's grandchildren and Aaron and me in the 1970s.

I don't know what it's like to be a father, but being an uncle is a lot of fun. I had an uncle who I was close to growing up – my Uncle John. You met him with your mom, in Old Town, about a year before he passed away from Lou Gehrig's disease in 2015. When Aaron and I were young we had all kinds of fun with John. He was single, had cool cars, had a cute dog. What more can you ask for? Just kidding. John was someone who made me feel important, and helped me see the world as a more inventive and creative place.

I hope you feel the same way about me. For most of your lives I've lived much farther away from you than John did from me. I've always looked forward to my trips to see you guys, even more so because they happen only once a year. We've done a lot of

things together – smuggled a lot of Cinnabons into movies, explored old gold mines, dragged Mona & Layla along on many walks, eaten some of the best Tijuana-style tacos in America. We’ve flirted with a contact high as we threw frisbees around Balboa Park, raced down Water Slides in Nashville and, most recently, gazed out over Manhattan like Three Kings, from the heights of Rockefeller Center. We’ve shared too many outings to list, and hopefully many more to come.

For now, I simply want to sing the praises of uncles and nephews. Free from the emotional expectations of parent and child, an uncle can slide in from time to time and remind a nephew – hey, I like you for the person *you are*, without any expectations. It’s important to have those kind of people in our lives. That is how both my Uncle John and my Uncle Robe made me feel.

Somebody once wrote, “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it does rhyme.” It makes so much sense. Let me do some quick math. If I live to be 96 (like Uncle Robe was when I visited), you two will be 71 and 68 years old. That will be old enough for at least one of you to have a grandchild who is in their early twenties. Maybe that grandchild will be inspired to drive across the country and come visit their *great-great* uncle. I’ll have my giant hat ready to wear in the car when they drive me to a 5pm cafeteria-style dinner.

In Memorium
John P. Poorman (1950 – 2015)



John & Garth – West Hebron, 1978



*Ben, David, Sheri, Don, Sherina, Joanne, Garth, Anita, Angela, Aaron
& Allen – Adams, 1981*

ADAMS, 1998

*“Singing sweet country music, breathin’ clean mountain air
Singing sweet country music, makes me wish that I was there.”*
- Red River Boys, “Sweet Country Music”

David Alford went to college at Juillard, in New York City, to become an actor. When he graduated, he stayed in NYC and found steady work, in an industry famous for its number of unemployed. He was doing what he loved, in America’s most competitive city. Yet, amidst all that excitement, he heard a soft voice. The Red River was beckoning him home.

Home is Adams, TN – a place where the air is clean and the music has a sweet country tang. It’s a farming town of 500 people, nestled near the Tennessee-Kentucky border. Rolling hills take the place of Manhattan skyscrapers. The smell of manure replaces the exhaust fumes of taxis. David moved from a neighborhood called Hell’s Kitchen to a place that could be called Heaven’s Porch. He traded the city for a life back on the farm.

I knew I wouldn’t have to worry about traffic once I got off the highway. David did the best he could with direction: “After you get off I-24, go straight for about four miles. You come to a stop sign and keep going straight. When you come to a T, take a left. Go down about two-tenths of a mile and then take your next left. You will come to another T in the road. Take a left there and go down exactly one mile. Sugar Tree farm will be the driveway on your left.” Okay, got it.

I exit the Interstate onto a two-lane road carved into peaceful countryside. As soon as I’m away from the roar of the highway, I put my Red River Boys cassette into my Saturn’s tape deck. David recorded this album when he was still a teenager. The

Red River Boys played county fairs and regional competitions before life took the members in different directions. I first heard this album as a kid and have loved it every since. To me, this music *is* Adams, Tennessee – the smell of tobacco barns and the sight of farmland, as far as the eye can see. I roll down my windows, turn up the volume, and let David's voice guide me to Sugar Tree Farm.

Sugar Tree Farm has been in the Alford family for 114 years. A plaque commemorates the day Ben Lafayette Foster bought the original tract of 100 acres from Lawson and Mose Washington in 1884. That was only 19 years after the Civil War ended. Some acres have been sold off, but the farmhouse and barns are still intact. The house is still owned by David's parents, Ben and Sheri, who are letting David live in it while Ben serves as pastor of a Methodist church in Nashville. David is married to Katrina, herself a native of Tennessee, and they have two young sons – Overton, 3, and Hanson, 1 – who are now free to run around the farm like David did growing up.

David left NYC with what he admits was an overly idealistic goal: to save the small American theater. In mid-sized cities across the South and Midwest, the quality of theater is nowhere near the level of professional companies on the East and West coasts. Nashville, a city of five million, seemed the perfect opportunity for David to put his idealism to the test. When he returned four years ago, his goal was to start a professional acting company from the ground up and reinvigorate the theater scene. Sugar Tree is his base of operations for this fledgling project – close enough to commute to Nashville, but far enough away to raise his family in the country air of his youth.

He's now on the cusp of seeing his dream take flight. His acting company will open the 1998-99 season on September 14th in a larger theater, with a bigger budget and, for the first time, a loyal season-ticket base. As I walk into his kitchen, however, none of this is evident. Hanson is throwing noodles from his high chair. David appears exhausted, having just returned from teaching an all-day Shakespeare seminar in Nashville. Katrina passed me as I pulled in the driveway, headed out on a 20-minute drive to pick up KFC for dinner. This is the other half of David's life. Raising a family with two young boys is part of the paradox underlying David and Katrina's exodus from the chaos of NYC – their lives

have become arguably *more* chaotic here, not less.

I step out after we eat to give David and Katrina some breathing room with the kids. I walk into the front yard and watch the sun set below the rolling hills. The title of a book by A.B. Guthrie comes to mind: “Fair Land, Fair Land”. A slight mist rises from the orchards. No human sounds can be heard, only the call of a thousand cicadas. I see the house of Richard Durham, David’s uncle. He and his wife, Mary Edna, bought a bit of land from the original farm and have retired here. They are content to work in their garden and enjoy the solitude of these hills. I can’t blame them. I hope I’m as fortunate when the days of my youth have passed me by.

Zero hour has come and gone. David and Katrina collapse onto the sofas in the living room with a collective sigh. David says he hasn’t watched TV in weeks. He flips it on, determined to get some use out of the satellite dish outside (cable hasn’t found its way to Adams yet). Katrina has stopped being a mother for an hour and put on her teacher’s cap. She is preparing for the new school year, which starts in a week. She’s been a teacher for nine years. The first four and a half were in Wilmington, DE, teaching fifth grade at an inner-city school. I tell her about my year at Cornerstone and we share stories of struggles and victories. I ask what she finds different about a rural school. “It’s like night and day,” she says. “Here I feel like I can actually teach rather than spend so much time on classroom management. But in Wilmington, I felt like I was needed and when I went home each day I knew I’d made a difference. Here I don’t get the same feeling of being needed. These kids already have it pretty good.”

Soon Katrina goes to her room, leaving David and I alone with the TV. We slowly unwind, discussing movies, sports – pretty much of anything of small consequence that comes to mind. We flip from one movie to the next, dissecting acting performances as we go. “A River Wild”, starring Kevin Bacon, provides ample fodder. We switch to “Philadelphia”, starring Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington. Finally, some good acting.

I feel at ease with David. I’ve spent the past two weeks with friends and relatives who were considerably older than me. This is a nice change. With certain people it’s easy to let my guard down. David’s one of those people. Lying on the couch, with my feet

propped up, I almost feel like it's Aaron and me, back in West Hollywood, on one of those nights we spent together in our apartment. On a trip of this length, a little bit of home goes a long way.

• • •

*Hello darkness, my old friend
I've come to talk with you again
Because a vision softly creeping
Left its seeds while I was sleeping
And the vision that was planted in my brain
Still remains, within the sounds of silence.
- Simon & Garfunkel, "Sounds of Silence"*

I decide to linger in the morning. A renovated cow barn served as my hotel last night. The Cow Palace, as it is affectionately called, has a rustic charm. I like the crowded bookcases and old furniture. A record player gives the room an antique feel. I let it stretch its ancient legs to provide background music as I write. I find a Simon & Garfunkel album and gently place the needle on its innermost groove. The chords of "Sounds of Silence" fill the room. It feels like an appropriate choice. The farm has few distracting noises. Every so often, Richard or Ward will drive by on the gravel road, but even that is a soothing sound of comings and goings. Everything else is the sound of silence – human silence, at least. Words leap onto the page with greater ease. If I ever decide to write a book, this might be the ideal place.

At noon, I wander up to say goodbye. David is on the phone, arranging meetings. He wishes he had an office in Nashville, but at the moment that wish remains out of reach. We sit at the kitchen table and talk some more, about the absurdities of the entertainment business. I tell him about the time I was working as Peter Locke's stand-in assistant and he got a call from Les Moonves, the President of CBS Television. Peter was on another call, and I didn't know who Moonves was, so I took a message. Peter was baffled when he heard and immediately tried to call back, but now Moonves' office wasn't taking his call. Lucky for me, I was also tutoring Peter's son at the time, so he didn't get angry. Chalk it up as a Hollywood lesson.

David laughs, then points out a coincidence in my run-in with Les Moonves. Moonves was responsible for firing two of David's friends, who had signed on to do pilots for CBS. It feels odd to be swapping Hollywood stories on a farm in Tennessee. Chances are that David and I are the only two people in a 20-mile radius who know the name Les Moonves.

David is in the midst of his own television odyssey. He and a friend have written a pilot and are trying to produce it locally, rather than sell it off and see their vision corrupted. He's familiar with the slow grind that this process entails. He is content to work, and to wait. But just before I leave he gets word that the chairman of the board of Nashville's largest equity theater has requested a meeting. The theater has had some trouble recently and their main benefactor is leading an effort at revitalization. It has a three million dollar annual budget – ten times larger than David's small theater company. When he hangs up the phone, David is clearly excited. Maybe the endless meetings and all the creative struggle are finally poised to bust open a new door. Only time will tell.

2018

Dear Marco & Ivan –

This is the first chapter that you can picture where I was staying. This is the farm where the Tennessee reunions are held. In case you forgot, David is the guy we saw last summer when we were in NYC. He was having a bite to eat with your mom, Grandpa Sturge and Grandma Joanne when we met them after going up to the top of Rockefeller Center.

Here's a very quick update on David since I visited him at Sugar Tree Farm in 1998. He eventually divorced Katrina, then later married a woman named Kahle. His sons Overton and Hanson are a bit older than the two of you. I saw them all last July when I was at the reunion. David's parents, Ben and Sheri, moved back to the farmhouse when Ben retired. Then, ten years ago, Ben died of cancer. Sheri, who you met, is still in the farmhouse, hosting each yearly reunion. Her other daughter is Julie. She's the mother of Cole and Jake and lives in the renovated barn just down the gravel road.

David is still acting. And, irony of ironies, he's back living in NYC with his wife Kahle. He had that Broadway show last summer that your mom saw him in, and for a few years he has been a regular character on the TV show "Nashville". That has been a nice payday. He seemed in good spirits at the reunion last July. He played a starring role in the highlight of our visit. One night we were there, David, Julie's husband Kyle, and another friend decided to bring out their guitars and have an old fashioned jam session – singing songs they've written over the years. Of the three who sang that night, Kyle is the only one who has released an album recently. I'll put my two favorite songs from his album on the Spotify playlist – one fast and one slow.

As I mentioned, David recorded an album once – way back in the 1980s. That album is lost to history. We don't have the cassette anymore, and it never made it to digital. Hearing him sing last summer reminded me how talented he is musically. I hope you get to listen to him play someday. You'll have to come to another reunion. When that happens, I promise to do everything I can to persuade David and Kyle to break out their guitars. Sweet country music. Clean mountain air. Kinda makes me wish that I was there.



Annie V and Vic – Old Hickory, 1998



Edye, Aaron and Wayne – Old Hickory, 1972

OLD HICKORY, 1998

It takes me an hour to drive from Adams to Old Hickory. It's a small community, northeast of Nashville, struggling to survive as a shadow of its former self. In the 1940s and 50s, Old Hickory was a thriving town. Dupont Corporation arrived in the 1920s and opened a huge rayon production facility here, bringing with it thousands of jobs, and a retail and construction boom in its wake. Vic Allen and Annie V Freeland (Nonnie's older sister) met at Dupont in the 1930s, near the beginning of all that excitement. They got married and rented a company-owned house on Debow Street, minutes from the plant. Their rent was \$14 a month.

Sixty years later, they are still married, and still living in the same house. In 1972, Annie V's oldest sister, Allene, moved to the house next door with her husband, Wayne. Wayne was also a lifetime Dupont man like Vic. But by the early 1970s – right around the time I was born – a new chapter was being written in the history of US manufacturing. That chapter could have been titled: Downsizing.

Dupont started closing large portions of its Old Hickory plant. Vic and Wayne both retired in 1975. Most moved away in search of new jobs. Old Hickory, it seemed, was on the wrong side of history. Today, a generation later, the village is mostly abandoned storefronts and empty parking lots. But both Vic and Wayne still call it home. Wayne drives me into what used to be the heart of town. A dollar store, a post office and a barber shop are the only signs of commerce. I inject \$10 into its ailing economy by getting a haircut. Then we drive around some more as Wayne points out places of family interest, including the house where Grandpa Sturge lived as an infant, with Nonnie and her sister Theda, while his Dad served in WWII.

Wayne has a ton of energy for an 85 year old. He and Allene

have a remarkable history together. They were born one day apart in 1913. By 1917, their families were living only a mile apart, in northern Tennessee. In the 81 years since, they have never been further away from each other than that single mile for any period longer than a week. How crazy is that?

They are the parents of Sheri Alford. That makes David one of Wayne's grandsons, which explains where David got his musical talent. Allene's brother Dewitt told me that he and Wayne would stretch out on the floor as teenagers at Mama and Papa Freeland's house. This was way back in the 1920s. Wayne would be playing his guitar and singing, maybe a popular tune like "All Around the Water Tank". Then he would stop abruptly, look toward the door and say, rather loudly, "Well come on in. How are you?" Mama Freeland would come rushing out of the kitchen to welcome the guests she thought had arrived. Except that no one was there. Sometimes she'd get all the way to the door before realizing he'd pranked her. "I oughta shoot you," she'd say to Wayne. He would smile and say, "Why Miss Cassie, I was just singing."

A guitar sits in the corner of Wayne's living room, a reminder of those playful times. Next to it is a piano, displaying the music and lyrics to "Circle of Life", a song David wrote for his wife Katrina. David serenaded her out of the farmhouse with this song on their wedding day, strumming along on his guitar, like his grandfather used to do lying on the living room floor in Oak Grove. The parallels between Wayne and David remind me of Thomas Hardy's poem "Heredity":

I am the family face,
Flesh perishes, I live on,
Projecting trait and trace
Through time to times anon,
And leaping from place to place
Over oblivion.

The years-haired feature that can,
In curve and voice and eye,
Despise the human span
Of durance – that is I;
The eternal things in man,

That heeds no call to die.

I decide to spend two nights in Old Hickory with Vic and Annie V. Their guest room has been well used over the years. Annie V was the first of the eight children to leave home, get married and have a house of her own. She became a surrogate mother to her siblings who followed in her footsteps to Old Hickory. Nonnie and Grandpop would stay with Vic and Annie V when they would visit from Philadelphia. Vic says my grandfather preferred to sleep in the living room. He would sleep stretched out on the sofa, waking up early to go out and get the paper before anyone else was awake. Vic has fond memories of my grandfather. “He made himself right at home down here in Old Hickory,” Vic says. “That’s just the way Annie V and I preferred it.”

I make myself at home, just like Grandpop did. It isn’t long before Angela Redden arrives – someone from my generation. She’s Vic & Annie V’s granddaughter and we haven’t seen each other in 16 years. We quickly fish out pictures of the old days. There is one of my family, Angela’s family and the Alfords up at the farm from the early 1980s, before we moved to Zimbabwe (*note*: it’s the photo at the beginning of the Adams chapter). I’m nine years old, with curly blond hair. In the past 16 years my hair has grown darker and is now clipped short at the sides. I also have grown, to the height of 6-feet, 2-inches. Angela has grown in a different way. She is eight months pregnant with her first child, a boy. We have a long conversation, catching up on life. Vic says little. He is having, by his own admission, a bad day. His health is waning. His legs are badly swollen and he is having problems with both his balance and his bladder. He still speaks coherently most days, but when the pain becomes intense his words lose comprehension. Watching Annie V care for him reminds me of Nonnie in the early years of Grandpop’s Parkinson’s disease. Coincidentally, Vic and Annie V are the “original” Nonnie and Grandpop. My grandmother decided that she wanted Aaron and I to use those names after getting the idea from her sister. Now it looks like Annie V is following in her younger sister’s footsteps in a more sorrowful way – by caring for a spouse as their mind succumbs to dementia.

The next day I walk twenty steps from Annie V’s to Allene’s for lunch. They live *that* close to each other. As soon as I walk in

I'm hit by another sense memory: the smell of Allene's kitchen. It has been imprinted on my memory since I was a kid. The unique smells of each house in Tennessee are as familiar to me as their inhabitants. Amazingly, Annie V's and Allene's houses, only yards away, have completely different smells. The same goes for Lorene's house, a few miles away in Madison. A single whiff brings with it a connection to childhood. There is a cliché that says, "You can never go back". To an extent, that is true. People get older. Houses undergo changes. Things don't look the same to you as they did when you were young. But there should be an asterisk next to that saying, because walking into these houses, I can close my eyes, smell the aroma and, for a moment, get the exact same sensation as I did as a nine year old in 1983. I wish I could describe these smells, but I can't. It is a sensory experience that eludes description. National Geographic wrote about the connection between smell and memory. "Memory and fragrance are intertwined, some biologists insist, because the sense of smell plugs smack into the limbic system, the seat of emotion in the brain. No other sense has such immediate access," it wrote. The author Tom Robbins wrote essentially the same thing, only more lyrically: "Our sense of smell is our strongest link to the past, our closest fellow traveler in the future."



With limited time in Old Hickory, my stay becomes a race to see as many people as possible. On my last night we eat dinner at Allene's. Lorene is there when I arrive. Sheri, Julie and her new baby, Cole, stop by. Angela's husband John follows. Anita and Bobby (Angela's parents) come last. We do what all relatives do – exchange pictures. Photos are as much a part of family gatherings as hugs and laughter. The newer pictures arrive in small, neatly kept albums, or jammed in pocketbooks, still in the envelopes. Most of them are of children. We pass them around and admire, keeping us connected to the ever-expanding family tree. The older photos stand stoically in frames, inhabiting mantles and nooks, keeping watch from their posts on bookshelves and walls. I pay special attention to these older ones. There are pictures of Mama and Papa Freeland in every house. Vic has a picture of his father on his bedside table. Pictures of Haskell look down from nearly every

wall in Lorene's den. I am reminded, again, of how "*trait and trace*", to borrow Hardy's words, are projected "*from time to times anon*".

On my final morning in Old Hickory, I drive to Lorene's house with Wayne and Allene. Chic, Theda, Bill and Jeannette are on their way up from Chattanooga (Theda & Jeanette are two of Nonnie's other sisters). They're joining us for lunch. Vic and Annie V meet us all after a doctor's appointment. Lorene's daughter and granddaughter, Theresa and Tonya, come over from work. We all sit in the living room and visit, allowing a large meal to settle. I've eaten so much food since I've been in Old Hickory. Each meal includes about seven dishes – green beans, casseroles, creamed corn, pink jello – the list goes on and on. Each host wants to make sure I've had my fill. When I finally leave Lorene's that afternoon, more than just my stomach is full. The hospitality and love that has been showered on me in Old Hickory has left me with a deeper, longer-lasting kind of satisfaction: my soul is full as well.

2018

Dear Marco & Ivan –

I know it's impossible for you to keep all these names straight. Too many people, too many places, and too many generations separating your world and theirs. Let's go back to the basics for a second. All the stories from Adams, Old Hickory and Crossville (which is the next chapter) are connected to you through Grandpa Sturge's mother. Aaron and I called her Nonnie. Nonnie died in 2008, but for the last five years of her life she wasn't really herself. She was suffering from Parkinson's disease and dementia, same as Grandpa Sturge's father had a decade before. I know Marco remembers Nonnie, but Ivan was only seven when she passed away. Nonnie grew up in Oak Grove, Tennessee. She met Sturgis (Sr.) when he was a doctor in Nashville, before going off to WWII. Only after the war, after Grandpa Sturge was born, did she move north with him to Pennsylvania, where his family was from. Nonnie was the only one of the eight brothers and sisters to leave Tennessee. When I wrote this journal in 1998, all of them were still alive. Twenty years later, only the three youngest survive – Lorene (who sends you birthday cards), Donald (who I visit in the next chapter) and Jeanette, who lives in Chattanooga. That generation is quickly passing away.

All eight of them revered Mama & Papa Freeland. That love is evident in these stories. It made me think of a quote I read this morning, written by James Baldwin, who captures the essence of parenthood:

“Children can survive without money or security or safety or things: but they are lost if they cannot find a loving example, for only this loving example can give them a touchstone for their lives.”

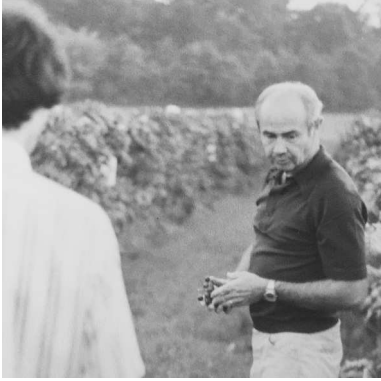
The Freeland family – Mama and Papa and the eight kids – were relatively poor, especially after the Depression hit in the 1930s. Pretty much everyone was. There wasn't much money to go

around. But Nonnie and her siblings had their parents, and through them, a touchstone for how to live their lives. The kids never stopped being grateful to them until their final days. That is why a photo of Mama & Papa Freeland had a prominent place in each of the homes I visited. The lives the kids went on to live was rooted in the basic human decency they saw their parents display.

I'm lucky to have had Nonnie as a grandmother. Both she and Nana Dot loved Aaron and I unconditionally. In many ways, being a grandparent is easier than being a parent. They can concentrate on giving unconditional love, without the day in, day out worries of parenthood. Maybe that's the reward for going through the trials and tribulations of parenting – finally getting to kick back and watch your grandkids grow up and flourish.

There will soon be a time when all of Nonnie's generation is gone. The lives that generation lived are far removed from my life, and even farther removed from yours. Customs, ingrained biases, assumptions, beliefs – all those change drastically from a person born in 1918 to another born in 1998. What doesn't change, whether it's 1801 or 2001, is love. The best chance for humans to thrive is when they feel loved, unconditionally.

Whenever I'm tempted to feel sorry for myself, I claw myself back to this foundational perspective, for which I'm endlessly grateful: I was born into an extended family who loves me, and who are examples of how to love and respect others. It is the greatest gift anyone can get. The same is true for the two of you. Life isn't ever perfect. The people we wish were there for us aren't always the ones who show up. But think of how many people on all sides of your family care for you and would do anything to support you. That's a gift. I hope you grow to cherish it as much as I do.



Donald – Crossville, late 1970s



Dewitt – Old Hickory, 2003



Mama Freeland (center) and all her girls. (From left) Theda, Allene, Jeanette, Lorene, Nonnie & Annie V – mid 1970s

CROSSVILLE, 1998

*“Working on the land that we’re born to live for,
Loving for the land, that is where we’re blessed.”*

- Martin Guerre, “Working on the Land”

Donald Freeland knows more about the land he lives on than anyone I know. His is a quiet knowledge, confident in scope, unwilling to force itself on others. For 26 years he has been living on 500 acres of farmland in Crossville, TN, heading the research arm of the University of Tennessee’s Agriculture Department. At the end of this year he will retire. The job has evolved and fundraising gradually became a more important part of the job than hands-on research – which was always Donald’s passion. “I realize that I have lost enthusiasm for the job as it is now,” he says. “So I knew it was time to step aside and let someone else come in who would give it the attention it needed.”

That’s the kind of man Donald is – compelled by a deep sense of duty. The more I spend time with him and his seven siblings, the more I realize that these traits were ingrained in them from the start. Mama and Papa Freeland must have done something right, because in all my many conversations with their children I am unable to detect traces of egotism or malice. Sure enough, the first thing I notice in Donald’s living room is a picture of his parents. I’m amazed by how much Donald resembles his father, especially when he smiles. Much like Papa Freeland, who died before I was born, Donald has always been a bit of a mystery to me. His quiet manner makes him less accessible than his more gregarious brother Dewitt, who is the family storyteller and scribe. Donald is less of a people person than the other seven, often content to remain quiet and observe the world around him.

I've come to Crossville, situated on a fertile plateau in Eastern Tennessee, to dispel some of that mystery. I pull into the driveway of the agricultural station's farmhouse cautiously, unsure if I'm in the right place. The house and yard seemed so much bigger when I was young. Hammocks, motorcycles and John Deere tractors are what I remember of the farm. Now it just looks like a small ranch house, absent the energy that comes with kids running in every direction. Donald and his wife, Sue, are in the process of moving out. In anticipation of his retirement, they have already started transferring their belongings to a cottage they own down the road.

Donald is waiting for me. Sue is at the other house, preparing dinner. Dewitt, Sarah, Sandra, Mark and Kimberly are going to spend the evening with us as well. Looks like it's about to be another Freeland party.

Seeing Dewitt and Donald means I will have seen all of Nonnie's brothers and sisters in the same day. Apart from the yearly reunion, that's no small feat. Two live in Chattanooga, three in Old Hickory, one in Hendersonville, and one in Crossville. Lorene said at lunch that the most important thing to Mama Freeland was that her family stay in touch, and make a point to see each other often. Twenty years after her death, she'd be pleased to see what a tight-knit group they still are.

After we poke around the old farmhouse, Donald takes me to the cottage and we engage in a little "front porch living". In other words, we sit in a pair of rocking chairs and talk about life. He fills me in on the history of Crossville and then we pivot to the life cycle of cicadas – which are currently livening the air with their mating calls. Mark and Kimberly arrive and the five of us sit down for dinner. After dinner the remaining three arrive, including Dewitt, and we gather in the living room to talk.

Dewitt's been through some trying times lately. He looks tired and isn't as talkative as usual. It's been a long summer for his branch of the Freeland family tree. His grandson Ryan was almost killed in a car accident two months ago. For the first month, he was in a coma. Last week, Ryan finally left the Chattanooga Trauma Center and returned to Crossville, where his parents live. As soon as they heard of the accident, Dewitt and his wife, Sarah, came to Chattanooga from Hendersonville to comfort their daughter

Debbie and be with Ryan. Even though Ryan is no longer in a coma, huge obstacles remain. His speech is slurred. His hearing is gone in one ear. His memory is patchy. Maybe worst of all, Ryan is insisting he doesn't need rehabilitation. He is 19 years old and doesn't realize the extent of his limitations. His grandparents, his mother and his aunt Sandra (the same Sandra I stayed with in New Orleans) are constantly encouraging him. All of this has taken its toll on Dewitt. I can see it on his face.

Dewitt still apologizes for not being in Nashville when I was there. "I would have taken you up to Oak Grove and shown you around," he says. Oak Grove is one place I regret missing. It's where Mama and Papa Freeland raised their family, navigating the prosperity of the 1920s, the poverty of the 1930s, and the uncertainty of WWII. They managed it all with quiet dignity and a stern moral example. As the third oldest, Dewitt was able to understand the struggles his father went through when the Great Depression hit. Papa Freeland had operated a general store throughout the 1920s and early 30s. When the national economy collapsed, instead of denying local farmers goods that would allow them to survive, Papa Freeland went into debt. The bank ended up foreclosing on his store. Papa Freeland's relatives helped him out after that, but Dewitt said his father was never quite the same. In a poem titled "Mama and Papa and Us Kids", Dewitt writes about that time:

Now Papa would complain "Dog gone it all",
 "Lord help us" he'd say amid disgust
 But I never heard him say
 There were too many of us.

Mama would make us each feel good
 That we were important each in our own way
 Bragging to Papa what each had done
 When he came back from a busy day.

My heart still hurts today
 When I remember seeing their pain
 As they struggled and worked
 But could see no gain.

There's time since I became a Daddy
 I've sweated the bill I had to meet
 But Papa was hoping and praying
 We would have something to eat.

Losing the store wasn't the only obstacle Papa Freeland faced. Their house burned down a few years later, destroying everything except the family trunk. But as Dewitt's poem draws to a close, it rediscovers optimism and joy amidst the uncertainties of life:

I won't let my memory dwell
 On the negative aspects of our past.
 Because there're too many positives
 And, yes, there's too much class.

Mama and Papa to all us kids
 Lived examples of what they taught.
 When we faced decisions alone,
 We knew what they thought.

We read about storybook mothers,
 Examples of storybook dads.
 But we would not want them
 In the place of the ones we had.

Hearing Dewitt's stories, and seeing the pain Ryan's accident has caused, I'm reminded that suffering in life is unavoidable. No strength of will or dedication to prayer can prevent trouble from creeping in. We can't avoid hard times, but we have the ability to deal with them constructively when they come along. The complexity of life makes each struggle unique, but there are a few constants in how best to deal with troubled waters, once they lap at your door. The first is welcoming the assistance of those who love you. The second is to resist the urge to blame. As Keith Green writes in his song "How Can They Live Without Jesus":

*Throwing away the things that matter,
We hold on to things that don't ...
And if you've been burnt here's what I've learnt,
The Lord's not the one to blame.*

It gets late and we all grow tired. Donald, Sue and I return to the farmhouse. We settle into easy chairs and do a little nighttime reading. What used to be their dining room now serves as a makeshift den. Books and magazines are stacked everywhere. I start reading a magazine article about politics – a topic far removed from farm life. Looking around, it's clear that this has always been a house that encourages intellectual discovery. Donald and all three of his children have doctorates. I settle on wise as the most apt descriptor of Donald's personality, but it's not because of his academic degrees. His knowledge is coupled with discernment, compassion and a lot of faith. Wise men and women don't try to persuade intellectual opponents with dogmatic arguments. They tend to be humble, live out their own truths, and be keenly aware of the scope of how much they *don't* know.

• • •

In the morning, Donald gives me the obligatory tour of the agricultural research station he has presided over for 26 years. We make our own roads in his rugged pickup truck. He shows me endless rows of green beans, corn, apple trees and other produce. Initially, my nostrils are assaulted by the smell of pigs. Then the smell becomes familiar and morphs into a reassuring sense memory of growing up near farms in West Hebron. Donald answers all my naive questions about farming with patience. I ask if he has a desire to travel. "There is so much more to know than can ever be known in just one small square mile of land. So I don't see much use in going places when there is so much still to learn right where I am," he replies.

I realize how little I know about the land beneath my feet. It's a recent phenomenon that people have become detached from a personal relationship with the earth. We are now a mostly urban society. What kind of long-lasting effect will this separation have? I don't know. But I do know this – I suddenly have an irresistible desire to stick my hands into the earth and harvest – to uproot a

carrot, pull up a radish or rip off an ear of corn. I say goodbye to Donald and drive away from the farm, but something Donald says sticks with me: “When Sue and I came here 26 years ago, we had lots of plans of how we were going to change this place. But we didn’t end up changing anything. The land changed us. It always does.”

2018

Dear Marco & Ivan –

Working at the same job for 26 years! The longest I've had a single job were my four straight years working at UCLA. Other than that, I've bounced around like a free electron, unable to find a stable nucleus. There is nothing intrinsically better about staying at one job. It worked for Donald. It might not work for someone else. But, I'll admit it does make me a bit jealous to read about how early, and how *clearly*, Donald discovered his vocational purpose.

I've always wanted to discover a way of making money that I'm excited about. I haven't solved that riddle, but I haven't given up hope. Even as I write this I have another plan in mind – a creative project that plugs into my natural interests, and hopefully can put a little money in my pocket.

I'll admit that my inability to find my professional sweet spot has been a source of insecurity for me my entire adult life. Allow me to rewind to my college years, to a time when I was not much older than Marco is now, to tell the whole tale.

This will sound like I'm bragging, but I was an excellent college student – close to straight A's all four years at college. I graduated summa cum laude and felt like I had the world at my fingertips. I remember my dad coming up to Lehigh the day I'd turned in the final assignment of my senior year. We had lunch together and talked about what was next. I'd already decided to get into teaching and had a summer job lined up. I had a heart for helping kids, specifically inner city students. I thought the intersection of those two interests would be where I'd find my purpose.

For reasons too complicated to explain here, teaching quickly got the best of me. I couldn't deal with the stress. I taught for a year in inner-city Philadelphia. At the beginning of my second year, I ran away. I'm talking, "leave a note to the principal in my classroom saying I quit" ran away. I moved to Los Angeles to live with Aaron, wanting to get as far away from my failure as possible.

I found a straight-forward, no-stress job in LA – as receptionist at an entertainment company. That is where I met your cousin Estee, who worked there in the legal department. I just

wanted to make a little bit of money without having the stress of teaching. I wanted to live my life and have fun as a twenty-something in LA. Nothing wrong with that.

But the yearning to do something that felt meaningful didn't disappear. It cropped back up two years later, when I convinced myself I was ready to go back to teaching. When I took this trip across country in 1998, I was about to start a graduate program at UCLA. The plan was to become a high school history teacher. Five months later, I had quit that program, too. I was 25 years old and I'd fallen on my face twice. I got a stress-free administrative job at UCLA and went back to enjoying my life in other ways – friendships, sports, dating – the normal things.

I learned to accept the trade-offs that seem baked into the reality of many American jobs: work 50 weeks a year, get two weeks of vacation, and convince myself that this is the way things are. It kind of worked for a while, but not really. Through the rear view mirror, I can see that accepting such a fate pushed me toward finding exciting distractions outside of work to make life feel ... well, *alive*. I'm not ashamed to say what those distractions were: women and sex. The thrill of finding the next one, or thinking there might be a "best one", helped numb me to the reality that I was spending the bulk of my life doing work I cared nothing about.

When I moved back to Philadelphia, it was because my lifestyle had gotten me into a ton of debt. I saw the writing on the wall and decided to crawl out of my financial hole, all \$30,000 of it. I didn't look for the perfect job. I was too emotionally raw at that time. I wanted something steady, something that didn't stress me out (I'm starting to sense a theme here), and something that would help me gradually pay off my debt.

I went back to administrative work. I was now in my 30s. I began to hate the inevitable question at parties: "What do you do for a living?" The person asking that question is usually just being polite, but I'd hear my inner voice saying – *you graduated near the top of your class at Lehigh and here you are in your thirties, working as a secretary. Good job, shithead*. Inner voices can be brutal. You know what is a good way to quiet our inner critic when it gets too loud? Distractions! Rinse and repeat.

Suffice it to say that, until I quit my job at American Bible Society, in January 2013, I was content to put the search for

meaningful work on the back burner. Over the past few years, though, it's made a resurgence. My inner critic hasn't disappeared, but it has quieted down. It started with caring for my uncle John as he was dying from ALS. Even though it was something small, something personal, it reminded me how nice it is to do work that feels *purposeful*. That was followed by another caregiving job. There, too, in some small but significant way, I made the life of one elderly man more fulfilling in his final years. It wasn't 40 hours a week, 50 weeks a year. I was in charge of my own time. Gradually, I've found myself wanting to fill my free time less with distractions, and more with activities that bring me quiet joy – walking trips, time with friends, whimsical creative projects (like this book).

What's my point? Can we have a life where earning and purpose co-exist? Yes. Donald Freeland did. My Dad found his answer in the ministry. My uncle John found his in transportation planning. There are literally thousands of examples of people who've done it. Have I found my ultimate sweet spot yet? Not quite. But I'm getting closer. If I'm lucky enough to live another twenty years, and look back through *that* rear view mirror, I'm confident my answer will be a resounding yes.

I hope whatever paths your lives take will benefit from my honesty. Life is a lot of falling down and getting back up. There are always a few dead-ends. But persistence can win out. I'm 44 and still at it. I hope you take inspiration from that.

P.S. – In January 2018, Donald turned 88. He is still living in Crossville. Dewitt died in 2012, at the age of 94. His grandson Ryan recovered from his terrible accident and has a 9-year-old daughter.



*Lehigh friends: Turner, Garth, Ray (top), Ketan (below),
Dave – New York City, 2002*

NEW YORK CITY, 1998

Yankees baseball ...
Mets suck, BoSox suck, Angels suck
Everybody sucks ...
Yankees baseball!
 - Bleacher chant, Yankee Stadium

I'm happy to get away from home. Phoenixville has a numbing effect on me. When I'm there, I feel a lack of energy. I slink around, alternating between the bed and watching TV. The best way to describe it would be as a lack of ambition – evidenced by my inability to add a single word to this journal in the week I was there. The week did recharge my batteries, though. I'd grown tired from the near constant travel, so the rest was therapeutic. Four weeks and two days into my trip, I gathered my bags this morning and set out on the second stage of my journey. First stop: New York City.

I have a tradition in NYC. I try to avoid paying for parking at all costs. Sometimes it's a little tough, but never impossible. I'd told my friends Ray and Dave that I'd meet them at 5:30pm at Ray's apartment on the Upper East Side. At 5:29, I'm pulling up to the intersection of 72nd & 1st Ave. I could turn into the nearest parking garage and be on time. But my conscience won't allow it. I keep circling, in hopes of hitting pay dirt. It takes ten minutes, but I finally grab a free spot a block away. Sweet satisfaction.

Dave and Ray are exactly as I remember them. The last time I've seen them was New Year's Eve 1995 – two and a half years ago. That night devolved into confusion. Dave got so drunk that he was kicked out of the bar where we were celebrating. I took him to his apartment in a taxi, then realized I'd left my jacket back at the

bar. So I trekked all the way back uptown, not an empty taxi in sight, to retrieve it. By that time, our whole group was hopelessly separated. I returned to Dave's apartment, where he was still passed out, but never ran into Ray or Ketan again.

I bring that night up and Dave immediately cringes. He swears he will never get that drunk again. In the years since, both Dave and Ray have graduated from law school and taken the bar exam to become full-fledged lawyers in the state of New York. Both have their eyes set on patent law, and they already have jobs that start next month. I almost choke on a potato chip when Ray tells me his starting salary is \$92,000. I have to remind myself that money alone doesn't bring happiness – but it does solve some worries. But I'm genuinely happy for Ray, especially since he has never struck me as a guy hell bent on chasing the big bucks at any cost.

We decide to go to "The Stadium" to see a Yankees-Angels game. It's been a decade since I was last there, with my Dad I think, but I can't be sure. This year the Yankees are killing it. They've won 95 games and have their eyes set on breaking the single-season record of 113. Seven bucks gets each of us a seat in the right field bleachers. New York's "Bleacher Creatures" are known for their rowdiness, both toward the visiting team and toward and any fans who might dare to root for them (or wear non-Yankee gear). On cue, a man wearing a San Francisco Giants shirt walks up the steps in blissful ignorance. All of a sudden, the die-hard fans are all over him – pointing, booing, screaming profanity. The scene attracts notice, and soon more of the Bleacher Creatures join in the bullying. This is the herd mentality at its ugliest. I find myself yelling at the guy, and I'm not a Yankees fan.

The game starts, and so do the chants. First order of business is to chant the name of every Yankees player in the top of the first inning. They are supposed to acknowledge the chant with a tip of their hat. It sounds ridiculous, but it's quite fun. We all stand and chant "Bernie Williams". He looks over at us, grins, and waves hi. We erupt in self-congratulatory fervor. After the first inning, things settle down a bit, waiting for the game to take shape. David Cone is pitching for the Yankees. Chuck Finley is on the hill for the Angels. Cone lasts until the top of the sixth, then is quickly pulled after the Angels take a 4-3 lead. Anxiety starts to rustle through the Bronx faithful.

The Yankees tie it up in the bottom of the seventh and still have two men on base, looking to take the lead. Meanwhile, some fans at the edges of the bleachers are trying to start “The Wave”. Dave is the first to voice his discontent. “Take that shit to Shea,” he screams in their direction. They persist, with one guy running to the front to play conductor. They aren’t having much luck. It soon catches the attention of the die-hards. The Yankee rally dies and the defeated conductor walks back to his seat. The die-hards proceed to rip into him, blaming him for the dead rally. They berate him with a fury I haven’t witnessed so far. One guy gets in his face and yells, “We don’t do that weak ass wave here bitch!” For a split second I wonder if there will be a fight. Cops move in and keep tensions from overflowing. The two rival factions – the wave aficionados and the die-hards – settle into a childish stalemate, exchanging middle fingers from opposite sides of the bleachers.

The Yankees enter the top of the ninth leading 5-4, but Mario Mendoza can’t close the door. The game goes into extras. Four hours pass and nothing has been resolved. The crowd dwindles as the night grows later. Those of us remaining cure our restlessness by chanting “Edmonds sucks” in the direction of the Angels’ center fielder. Not long after, Bernie Williams hits a line drive to centerfield that Edmonds can’t get to, driving home the winning run. Watching the replay, it seems to me that Edmonds, normally a great outfielder, should have made the play. Something must have been distracting him. Chalk victory number 96 up to the Bleacher Creatures.

By the time Ray and I get back to his apartment, it’s close to 1am. We try to see ourselves in the bleachers when ESPN shows the highlight of Chili Davis’ home run. No luck. It gets to be 3am and I suddenly remember the parking spot I found has street cleaning in the morning, starting at 8am. So much for sleeping in. I got what I paid for.

2018

Dear Marco & Ivan –

Between my Crossville chapter and this New York City one, more than a week had passed. I'd gotten *very* lazy about journaling. I'd been to Chattanooga, Atlanta, and then back at my parents' house in Phoenixville, PA. All that I did at those stops is mostly lost to my memory. In Atlanta, all I remember is watching Bill Clinton apologize on national TV for lying about his affair with Monica Lewinsky. I remember taking a picture, somewhere in Georgia, of gas prices as low as 89 cents per gallon. I got a speeding ticket driving through North Carolina. The only other thing I remember is that my parents were gone when I was in Phoenixville, and Estee flew in to see me.

Then came my trip to New York City, to see Ray and Dave. You've been to New York City now, so you can picture it. Ray still lives in the city, still works as a patent attorney. He moved to a bigger apartment, on the Upper West Side, not far from where we had dinner at PJ Clarke's. Like me, he never married. He's the same guy he was at age 24 – laid back, generous, easy to talk to, doing a job that pays well but that he doesn't love. He's still kinda clueless with women. I love the guy, though. He is my oldest friend who I'm in close contact with. It's nice to have someone like that, with so many years of shared experience in our back pockets. I feel that way even though Ray and I have very different political beliefs. As I wrote in my creed, I don't put that much importance in ideologies, my own or others. I pay attention to how people treat others face-to-face. I find that's a more dependable indicator of who I enjoy being around.

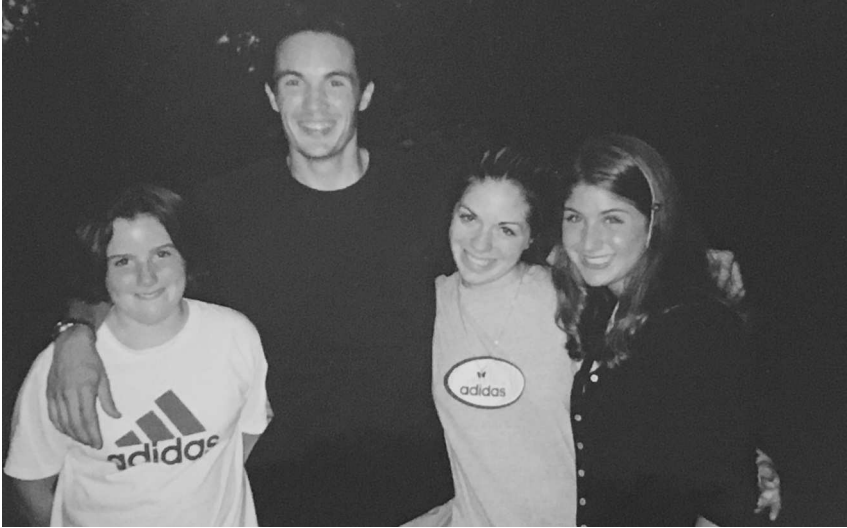
I haven't seen Dave in years, but I'm glad I've held on to my friendship with Ray. One of the few things I believe strongly is that friendships are a key ingredient to having a fulfilling life. A magazine article published in Atlantic Magazine really drove that point home for me. Google "What Makes Us Happy" and you'll see it. It's partially a story of George Valliant's life. He was a long-time director of the longest psychological study of human happiness ever conducted. It started in the late 1930s, with a group of men at Harvard University. The study followed each participant

throughout their lives. They anonymously shared intimate details about everything they experienced – joys, sorrows, successes, failures – in the hope that patterns would emerge for how to live a flourishing life. Half a century later, Valliant was asked what the most important discovery had been. He didn't hesitate. He said, "The only thing that really matters in life are your relationships to other people."

I have no idea how happy other people are. It's a subjective feeling, and it's fluid. One of the criticisms of social media is that it decreases people's happiness by inviting comparison to the shiny exterior of other people's lives. But when we take time to think about it, we know those exteriors aren't the real story. If George Valliant is to be believed, the best guess is that each person's happiness correlates directly with the quality of the relationships they have built with friends and loved ones.

In that regard, I'm very blessed. My parents and I get along as well as I could possibly hope. I have great friends, scattered throughout the country, who always have an open door when I visit. I have a girlfriend I love to laugh and spend time with. And I have a couple of great nephews who I really look forward to seeing each year. Nothing is perfect. I'd love to have a closer relationship with Aaron, like we once did. But who knows what the future will bring? I'm hopeful.

If history has taught me anything, it's that the future is unknowable. But I do know that the memories I cherish the most are the ones I shared with other people. For an introvert like me, that's an important lesson to remind myself of. It gives me the motivation I need to keep seeking out other people. To choose happiness. Because I'm betting that Valliant was right.



Morgan, Garth, Melissa and Natalie – Simsbury, 1998

SIMSBURY, 1998

I'm sitting on a stool in Nancy and Dennis' kitchen. It's 11pm and the only noise is the purr of the dishwasher. Melissa is upstairs on the phone with her boyfriend Josh. Morgan is spending the night with her grandparents. Nancy and Dennis are asleep. For once, the house has a sense of peace.

I've been here two days and this is my first opportunity to be alone with my thoughts. In a house with two girls, ages 15 and 11, such chances are rare. There is a lot excitement and laughter in this house, but also a fair amount of tears. It's not an atmosphere I'm used to, but one I can learn from. Now that it's quiet, let me see if I can reconstruct some of the dramas I've witnessed over the past couple days.

• • •

I arrive a bit earlier than expected on Friday and find the house deserted. Nancy and Morgan are shopping. No problem. I get back in the car and retrace my route to where I'd seen a sign announcing, "U-Pick'em Raspberries." I'd made a mental note of it earlier, thinking Nancy might help me make my favorite pie. I take a long dirt road back to a small farmhouse. A cart stands next to rows of raspberry bushes. There is a small box instructing the picker to drop their payment in after they finish: \$2.50 a pint, cash or check. The honor system catches me by surprise. Am I that jaded that I think people will steal raspberries?

I grab a container and start picking, reveling in the warmth of the sun. Since leaving Crossville, I've had a desire to harvest. I know a pie will taste better when I pick the berries. It's been so long since I've had a garden of my own, and I feel the poorer for it. I go up one row and down another, remembering how I used to pick raspberries across the street from Dick & Mary Emma's in West

Hebron. I put a couple in my mouth, savoring the tartness. I pick three pints and leave invigorated – almost like the natural high after a long run. I slip a check for \$7.50 into the box and head back to Nancy's. Money well spent.

The house is still empty. Dennis is the first to pull in. We've always been at ease together. We are both calm, calculated people, not prone to fits of visible emotion. Many of our beliefs differ, but we share a common temperament. Ten minutes later, Nancy and Morgan arrive. I immediately learn from Morgan that today is Melissa's first day off of being grounded, so she is spending it with her boyfriend Josh. Before I know what hits me, Morgan has suggested 10 different activities we can do together. She has an energetic personality, but lacks the ability to judge the mood of others, so her enthusiasm can feel like pestering. She is relentless when trying to get others to agree with her – a gift I wish I had – but is unable to handle it when she doesn't get her way. Because of this, drama follows Morgan everywhere she goes.

Nancy is in the middle – wife, mother, mediator – all rolled into one. Dennis struggles to relate to his daughters, so Nancy is the one who deals with most of their crises. Den's patience quickly evaporates in the face of Morgan's stubbornness. Nancy tries to find ground for compromise. Dennis doesn't relate much at all to Melissa, apart from the comings and goings of daily life. No matter how many times they try to look at the same problem, the solution they see always comes out looking different.

Take Melissa's boyfriend as an example. Josh is a 17-year-old black kid from Simsbury's version of public housing. Dennis can't understand why she wants to go out with Josh. He's fueled by his own subtle prejudices and doesn't realize that his coldness toward Josh is one of the reasons Melissa feels devoted to him. It's partly an act of rebellion. Melissa wouldn't break up with Josh if Den were to act differently, but some of the glamour would disappear, and her devotion might not be as strong.

Melissa's relationship with Josh is an archetypal high school romance. He represents everything that Simsbury is not: poor, black, unconventional. She clings to him because he defines her individuality. Much like my mother, Melissa is drawn to an underdog. Melissa thinks Josh is who she'll marry. When she says that, I smile. "I'd be surprised," I say. She asks why. "Because I've

been where you are now, and I've seen how time changes things." I leave it at that – food for thought for a 15-year-old trying to understand her emotions and map her identity.

Josh and Melissa pull up to the house around 10pm. Morgan, Dennis and I are finishing up a card game. Josh doesn't come in. As soon as Melissa steps foot in the door, Morgan hits her with a barrage of questions. Morgan idealizes Melissa and is envious of her privileges. She wants to know her opinion about *everything*. She asks about Melissa's friends. She probes for information about Josh. Melissa responds with indifference, which isn't odd for a sisterly relationship at their ages. But it pours fuel on Morgan's inner flames.

• • •

On Saturday morning, Dennis escapes to a bachelor party for his business partner Jay. The rest of us go shopping. Morgan protests that Melissa is getting more school clothes than her. We get back home and Melissa invites her friend Natalie over. Morgan bubbles with excitement. She absolutely *loves* Natalie. Sure enough, Natalie arrives and Morgan is in heaven. The questions flow forth, this time in Natalie's direction, who fields them all.

"Do you like my new jeans?" – Yes.

"Can you stay the night?" – No.

"Do you want to go tubing with us tomorrow?" – Maybe.

Here's the thing: we haven't decided to go tubing. It was thrown out as a possibility by Morgan, and somewhere along the way morphed into her reality. Melissa rolls her eyes. I smirk. Nancy takes a deep breath. Den, at a bachelor party, tips back another beer, unaware of the brewing storm. Like a tragic hero, Morgan is setting herself up for another disappointment.

After we eat Natalie's famous chicken parmesan, she has to leave. Morgan, Melissa and I settle into a game of Monopoly. You can guess who suggested it. Melissa is *trying* to lose. Morgan is building a strategy around low-cost properties like Baltic Ave. and Vermont Place. She soon lands on my four houses at Marvin Gardens. She doesn't have enough money and is forced out of the game. Melissa and I decide to end the game, right there and then. Melissa spends the next couple hours on and off the phone, waiting for a call from Josh that doesn't come. She talks to Sally instead, and

invites her to come over tomorrow. Morgan suggests she might want to join us tubing.

Melissa gives up hope of hearing from Josh. As the house quiets down, Morgan, Melissa and I sit in the den, sharing memories, mimicking family members, and have a grand old time. Away from parents and friends, there is less reason to argue. They are just sisters – and I’m their cousin – enjoying these few moments, truly listening to each other, reveling in laughter.

• • •

Sunday dawns and Morgan looks for a weather report. First we go to church, where the pastor preaches on the cost of discipleship. Melissa sits next to me, disinterested, just as I was at her age. An elderly woman sings a heart-felt, but off-key, solo of “In the Garden”. Nancy whispers that she has mental difficulties. I can’t shake the thought that her flawed harmony must be the sweetest sounds to God. If Jesus were among us, who would he rather listen to – the trained choir of Hollywood Presbyterian, or the halting chords of this woman?

Back at the house, Den has risen from his hangover. The weather is clear – perfect for tubing – but Morgan faces an even greater obstacle: complete disinterest from all other parties. Natalie can’t make it. Melissa says she doesn’t want to go (Morgan registers this as a ‘maybe’ in her ad-hoc poll). Den and I are unenthusiastic, but don’t want to crush her dream. I try to tell her nicely that I’d rather not, but she somehow spins it into support for the trip. I’ve never been good at saying exactly what I feel, especially if I think it’s going to disappoint someone. Nancy sees the writing on the wall and breaks the news to Morgan, who takes it in predictable fashion. Which is to say, she accuses Nancy of always letting Melissa get her way, and runs out of the room crying.

We settle on go-kart racing instead. Melissa’s friend Sally arrives and we set out in two cars: the girls and me in my Saturn, and Nancy and Dennis in the other. Away from parents, our car ride takes on a party atmosphere. Sally’s brought a tape and Melissa asks if we can play it. I know what I’m getting into, but say yes. It’s Germaine something-or-other, replete with all the expected lyrics – ‘bitch’ this and ‘motherfucker’ that. A part of me wants to take the

tape out and lecture them about the worthlessness of this music. A wiser part recognizes their opinions need to evolve on their own. Morgan rides shotgun, bouncing up and down, savoring this moment when she is with an older crowd. They ask if I like the music. I tell them, honestly, not really. I say, "But when I was your age this was my type of music. Then it just kinda got old for me." I hope Sally and Melissa will come to the same conclusion, because all this music glorifies is money, fame and sex. The roots of Gangsta Rap might be the Soul of the 1960s and 70s, but there is no true soul in these lyrics, just a lot of anger and bravado.

Lest I think I can leave tomorrow without experiencing one more temper tantrum, I am proven wrong. After go-karts, Melissa asks me to take her and Sally to see the movie "How Stella Got Her Groove Back". Morgan immediately starts planning how she might convince Nancy to let her go with us. Melissa and I know Nancy won't let her go to an R-rated movie, but humor her hopes anyway. As soon as we are in the house, Morgan makes her case to Nancy. I walk straight up the stairs, trying to escape the bomb blast before detonation. I'm not fast enough. I hear a scream as Morgan learns her fate. Ten minutes later, calm has returned. Nancy's compromise is letting Morgan spend the night with a friend. The problem is she can't find one who'll invite her over. She decides to spend the night with her grandparents instead.

Melissa, Sally and I head to the movie. It's a half-hour drive and I enjoy listening to them. Sally's mother is ultra-strict, so she is happy to be out of the house for a while. We talk about being a teenager, parents, going to college. The conversation is relaxed and intelligent and I feel a connection to these two teenage girls. The next three years of their life won't be easy. There will be plenty of opportunities to make mistakes. I pray the Lord holds them and keeps them safe.

I leave Simsbury on Monday morning, with a lot of thoughts swimming in my head about parents and teenagers. Morgan can be difficult, but she also has an amazing energy, and a determination that I wish I had. If harnessed correctly, it will serve her well in life. Nancy and Dennis are trying to be good parents – most times that's all you can ask for. Dennis tries to understand his teenage daughters, with mixed results, and Nancy does her best to combine love and discipline in setting realistic boundaries. Melissa is

probably closest to my heart. I see in her the same thirst for compassion, the same attraction to an underdog, that I have. I hope those seeds aren't washed away in the tumult of her high school years. Only time will tell.

2018

Dear Marco & Ivan –

I'm of two minds about this chapter. On one hand, I think it was one of my more insightful portraits of a family. On the other, it got pretty preachy, especially the part about rap music. That part made me cringe. These days I try to avoid that tendency – the feeling that I know the decisions that someone else *should* make. That's what I was thinking in that car. Luckily, I didn't lecture them. I saved my piousness for my writing, which, luckily, no one read – until now.

If the scene were repeated today, I wouldn't be thinking the same thing. When it comes to music and art and movies, I've learned that people like what they like. They don't need someone else telling them what's good for them, and what isn't. Good and bad evoke a black and white world, which can be misleading. The life I've seen is full of grays. If we must use reductive words, I'd say that each human is both good *and* bad, selfish *and* selfless, hero *and* villain – depending on the circumstances. We have it *all* inside us. We are plural. Or, as Walt Whitman phrased it, “we contain multitudes”. And yet, so often, we try to describe a person, in all their inherent complexities, with one or two words.

Take Melissa for example. I ended this chapter by writing, “I hope the fertile seeds of her compassion aren't washed away in the tumult of her high school years.” That was twenty years ago. No matter how I try and update you on what's happened since, it will be limited by what I chose to include, and that reflects the biases of my perspective on life. I can't lie to myself and say that I see Melissa's life objectively. I only see her once or twice a year. Just think of how much I don't know – how little *any* of us know about anyone, outside the two or three people we are closest to.

As for Melissa, one perspective could look at her life since 1998 and see nothing but a string of obstacles. She and Josh broke up. She got into a serious car accident and almost died. She got pregnant with a new boyfriend, had a baby and got married. They are still married, but only barely. It's been a bumpy ride. On top of all that, she's had health problems. She's struggled with opiate addiction. She continues to have an up-and-down relationship with

Nancy and Dennis. At times I've heard her ask, "Why do all these things keep happening to me?"

Yet there are so many other perspectives, so many stories within a life. To look at her from a more positive perspective, she's still alive. Given the severity of her accident, it's close to a miracle she didn't die. She's raised an energetic and curious daughter, Nyah, who is in middle school. She also raised Danny's daughter, Aly, who is now in her first year of college. Aly even considers Melissa her true mother. Melissa has loved and laughed and done things for others – all amidst the setbacks I listed above.

So how can we describe anybody in one or two words – let alone two thousand? We are all plural in the most complex, beautiful and contradictory sense – sometimes acting consistent with our beliefs, and other times doing the opposite of what we claim to believe, and plunging into perils we know not of. Such is the story of mankind.

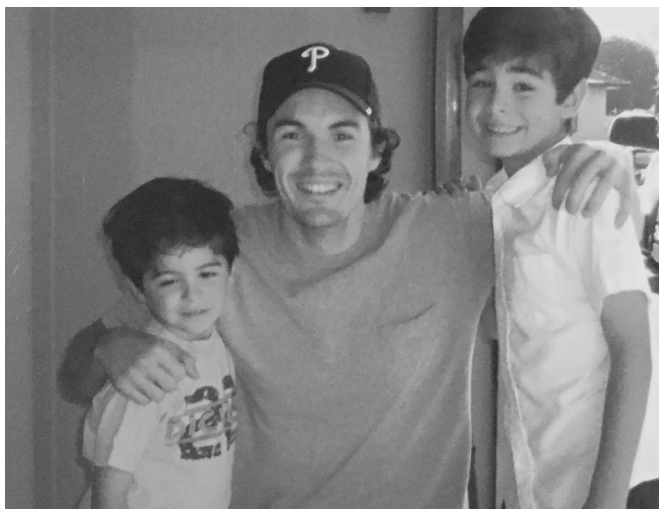
It's true of Melissa, it's true of Morgan, and it's also true of me. I've come to terms with this insight, long known to the great novelists of the world. We all do the best we can. Sometimes we fail, sometimes we succeed. We always keep learning. Given this complexity – this abundance of gray matter – my new focus is to stop pointing my finger at the perceived shortcomings of others. The easier we take it on others, the more forgiveness we have for ourselves.

As for Morgan, she's married and has two kids – one from a previous relationship in Hawaii, and one with her husband Mike. They live in Germany and work for the US military. I won't even attempt to update you on the nuances of Morgan's life because, as I've pointed out, I don't know anything near the whole, sprawling truth of her life. Those few facts will have to suffice.

If there is one life for which I have unlimited, intimate knowledge, it's my own. I keep a private journal, a place where I can be honest and searching and silly and reflective. My journal is a place where I can witness my own *plurality*, without worrying about being judged. It's a joy to write in it every morning.

Some day I'll be gone, but those journals will survive. I want you to have them. Any potential embarrassment won't matter anymore. They will simply be the honest musings of a guy doing the best he could – an intimate map to how I navigated the obstacle

course of life. The thought that you might flip through them from time to time is comforting. Maybe you'll read an observation, see a drawing, notice something that delighted me, and it will inspire something inside of you. Maybe something will make you laugh. That's the only kind of immortality I need.



The Three Amigos – Chula Vista, 2003

EPILOGUE, 2018

We arrive at the end of the road. The Simsbury chapter was my last. I continued the trip, but I didn't write anything more. I drove west, back across the country, along a northern route. I stopped in my hometown of West Hebron, NY. I visited my friend Rick Waite in Buffalo. I stopped in Wisconsin on my 25th birthday. I celebrated it in Milwaukee, at a restaurant where the servers intentionally insult the customers, as a joke. Only in America, right?

My final memory is getting a speeding ticket in Utah, then skipping my plans to stop in Las Vegas. I drove straight through to Los Angeles because I was missing Estee. I still remember our enthusiastic reunion at her place on Empire Drive in West LA.

Then life went on. I started my UCLA graduate program, only to quit five months later. Estee and I broke up. Just like that, all the plans I'd had fell apart. Life is unpredictable.

Now I'm sitting here, 20 years later, realizing how foreign the 24-year-old me feels. If I hadn't written these stories as I was on my trip, recreating them from memory would have been impossible. Memory is a curious thing – we tend to assume it's more reliable

than it is. At least that is what science currently believes. Maybe it's not that important. Life moves forward. Looking back is only useful if it can help illuminate our present.

I have no idea when each of you will get around to reading this book. Maybe right away. Maybe later this year. Maybe much later, when you are closer to the age I am now. Whenever it is, I hope these stories teach you something about this side of your family and all of its many sprawling branches. I hope it's given you a more honest perspective on my own life, with its continuing twists and turns.

I'm happy that I finally put the work into turning one of my travel journals into a book. This was a labor of love. I realize it was as much for myself as it was for the two of you. Often the stories I most want to tell someone are just lessons I still need to learn myself, in disguise. Having the two of you to focus on gave me an excuse to do just that, and have fun doing it.

I'll end with one final note of gratitude. I'm thankful that, for the past 20 years, I've been able to get to know you two, visit by visit, walk by walk, order of carne asada fries by order of carne asada fries. I'm thankful that I get to be your uncle, and that we have a fun, honest relationship. It's nice to know we have each other's backs, now and in the future.

A final toast: Here's to embracing life and noticing the many small occasions for joy and wonder all around us. I got to experience so many small joys when I drove across this country in 1998. I continue to experience them today. They are everywhere, hiding in plain sight, no matter where we are. Right at this very moment.

Advance Praise for Through the Rear View Mirror

"I think we should have been in it more. If not for us — no Garth! No book!"

- Sturge & Joanne

"The ramblings of a 24-year-old dude who desperately needs to get over himself."

- Amazon reviewer

"I enjoyed the pictures."

- David Dzodzorme

"If you're a coffee drinker, this hardcover edition makes a great coaster for your mug. Extremely sturdy."

- Howard Schultz

Chairman, Starbucks

"Doesn't have a chance of making the NYT bestseller list."

"In fact, many people are telling me this guy is a total loser."

"Didn't even vote for me."

- Donald Trump

"A journalistic tour-de-force. A work of art that cuts to the core of what it was like to be 24 in 1998, and to own a Saturn, and to know a lot of people you can crash with."

- Garth Poorman

"As self published books go, I thought this one was pretty, pretty, pretty, PRETTY good! But no, I didn't read it."

- Larry David

